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Rain For A Dusty Summer

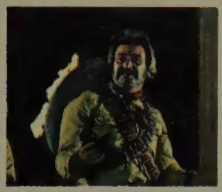
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. . ."Stay with us, Miguelito," Mama pleaded. "These are dangerous times, and you will be safe here."

Humberto brought his fist down on the table. "Stay with us and be in *danger* along with us. This is not a time to be safe. Our League is going to fight El General. Even Roberto is helping. We need you more than the Church does right now."

"But I have already said my vows to become a priest."

"It is a time for soldiers, Miguel."

"I do not think I would make a very good soldier. The time always comes when a soldier must kill."

"If someone does not intervene, soon every priest, *all* priests will be killed."

RAIN FOR A DUSTY SUMMER

by

Margaret Waite

Based on a screenplay by
Julius Evans & G.B. Buscemi

APOLLO BOOKS

Woodbridge, Conn.

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Printed in the United States of America

RAIN FOR A DUSTY SUMMER

. . . a word about the motion picture

RAIN FOR A DUSTY SUMMER recently concluded filming in Spain, Mexico and the United States and with its impressive cast of internationally famous actors coupled with the fabulous acting abilities of Father Humberto Almazan, the first Catholic priest ever to receive permission to star in a motion picture, it promises great entertainment for the whole family.

The editors of Apollo Books had the distinct privilege of attending a special screening of this film held recently in Hollywood and at the conclusion of the film, the decision was made to create this novel. The editors urge you to see the film when it reaches your local theater.

RAIN FOR A DUSTY SUMMER from Do/Bar Productions of New York City used a cast numbering in the hundreds together with countless creative people. Among the outstanding were:

CAST OF CHARACTERS

El General.....Ernest Borgnine
Miguel Pro.....Father Humberto Almazan
Colonel Marinos.....Aldo Sombrell
Laurette.....Gemma Cuervo
Humberto Pro.....Sancho Garcia
Senora Altera.....Maida Severn
Joe Wilder.....Harry Harris

Director.....Arthur Lubin
Producer.....Joseph Mawra
Associate Producer.....Gaetano Buscemi

The publishers wish to thank Do/Bar Productions for all of its cooperation and assistance in making this book possible.

RAIN FOR A DUSTY SUMMER

I

TEOHIHUACAN – 1950

Unobserved, Cabot Ames was able to make a close and careful examination of the girl sitting on the rock.

He scowled as his eyes ran over her cool, detached body. Some women, he reflected, are impervious to their environment. The intense Mexican midday sun, the dusty winds which blew abrasive debris down from the Teohihuacan pyramids, had none of the deteriorating effect upon her that it had upon the other feminine members of the excavating party.

Carla, Margot and Cecilia all had been de-glamorized, de-sexed by the relentless sun. Crescents of sweat shadowed their shirts under their armpits. Their make-up, fresh at sunrise, was smeared and streaked; their hair was straight and stringy, wilted with the heat and the volcanic dust that swirled down endlessly from those stone staircases which seemed to lead up to the skies.

Wes Argonne, who was in charge of the digs, had come over to share his noonday box lunch with Margo. It didn't seem to bother him that Margo seemed no longer a woman, but purely a fellow excavator. Women – as well as mad dogs and Englishmen – should stay out of the midday sun. . . All women, that is, but Ellen.

He allowed his scowling glance to travel back to Ellen; he could survey her leisurely without attracting her notice because she was deep in a problem in which she seemed completely absorbed.

Her expertly tailored jodphurs – in which, since sun-up, she had crawled, spaded, climbed, slid; lifted, pushed, pulled, pried and stumbled – appeared as impeccable as the day they came out of Abercrombie and Fitch. Her beige safari shirt seemed likewise totally resistant to archeological wear and tear. Twin pockets accented the full outlines of her breasts. In one pocket was a note pad; the other was filled with freshly-sharpened pencil stubs. (Ellen *would* bring freshly-sharpened pencils to the abode of Quetzalcoatl.)

Her note pad was ever ready to jot down any physicial observation that Hernando Cortes might have missed on his flight of the *Noche Triste*, many centuries before, relentlessly pursued by the forces of Montezuma.

Her tawny-golden hair, instead of being dulled by the dust, was burnished to glinting highlights by the sun. Her face, though devoid of make-up, appeared elegantly groomed without grooming.

Suddenly she looked up. "You're staring at me, Cabot," she said with that absent smile that was part of her uniqueness.

"I'm watching you think," he replied, wondering foolishly to himself what it was about Ellen that drew forth the worst in him – the vapid reply, the undistinguished pleasantry, the pointless rejoinder.

"The Aztecs did my thinking for me," she replied. Suddenly, stretching her long legs, she rose and was at Cabot's side, running her cool fingers through his hair.

"Each of the stones in these monuments weighs tons of tons," she said. "Neither the Aztecs nor the Toltecs nor the Mayas before them had ever heard of a horse till Cortes came and 'liberated' them. They hadn't invented the wheel; yet they managed to chisel out these giant stones, drag them to the spot and set them in place."

"Those ancients had strong backs and weak minds."

"Weak minds!" Ellen repeated after him, and laughed. There was always an element of a taunt in her laugh.

"They didn't have a telescope, nor lens, nor a modern observatory, and they knew nothing about pure mathematics, yet the Mayas discovered Uranus and Neptune long before we did. What's more," – she snatched the notebook from her breast pocket and read aloud some notes she had jotted down: "It took us 2,200 years to figure out the distance between the earth and the sun. We could have gotten the same answer if we had multiplied the height of the pyramid of Cheops by a thousand-million. The ratio of its height to the perimeter of its base is the same as the radius of a circle to its circumference. Does that give you a clue? . . . No, Cabot, I don't think you're a scientific thinker. Let's get closer to home. These pyramids here, that you're looking at; you multiply the number of terraces by the number of steps and divide by the total area, and you'll find out more things than Copernicus ever dreamed of. It is important that the Pyramid of the Sun should be 216 feet high and have five terraces, and the Pyramid of the Moon be 144 feet high. Every fifty-second year was one epoch in pyramid-building; the Mayas thought the world came to an end every 52 years. They laid out their pyramids according to astronomical lines of sight so they could look through the peepholes and have a line of sight along the azimuth of the meridian. They went crazy over mathematics, those Mayas."

(She was so beautiful, Cabot was thinking. God damn her!)

"They made a calendar that we haven't been able to understand, much less improve upon. Without even a slide

rule they figured out the exact length of the solar year and the sidereal year, down to the last decimal, and they managed to accommodate these figures without copping out with a Leap Year, as we do. Their calendar gave the equinoxes, the astronomical seasons, the position of the moon for every hour, even taking into account the rotation of the earth. They knew when to expect eclipses."

She paused for breath.

"I think they were defeated, in the end, by their own mathematics," Cabot managed to put in. "They spent all their time creating their calendar, without giving any thought to defining time... They were slaves to their own calculations."

Ellen sat down beside him on the ground. "You *are* coming to Chichén-Itzá with us," she said, leaning her slight body imperceptibly against his.

"For the umpteenth time, I am *not* coming to Chichén-Itzá."

"Don't be difficult, Cabot. It will be different from this. We will be going into deep, dark rain forests; we'll be out of this sun. We'll be digging in the shady, sexy jungle."

Yes, this was all part of the summer curricula. Three units of credit could be picked up penetrating the rain forests and swamps of Yucatan, traveling south to Palenque in Chicapas, then to Tikal and Ixkun in the Guatemalan jungle, then backtracking. All the great cities of the Mayan empire, inexplicably abandoned, their people gone and leaving no clues.

With these credits, Cabot could expect to get his degree in Archaeology by the following June.

Like Ellen, he, too, had been in love with the past. But our own present, he reflected, was suddenly only a whisper away from being the rubble-strewn past. What would the Cabots and the Ellens of the future find in the kitchen middens of Hiroshima? It had been five years since the A-bomb had burst over Japan. This very January President Truman had ordered the development of a new and even more terrible weapon, the hydrogen bomb. And only days before, in the late, sleepy days of June, the North Koreans had crossed

the 38th parallel to invade South Korea. What city would be the next Hiroshima? What civilization of today would disappear off the face of the earth, like that of the lonely cities of the Toltecs, leaving no clue except ▪ clay figurine here, and ▪ rubble-filled stairwell there?

Cabot thought of the seven envelopes in his brief case, back at the hotel. "I have a mission to perform," he reminded Ellen softly. "I have to find seven people. I have to give each of them ▪ message, long delayed. I have to tell them something that ▪ priest wanted them to know, over twenty years ago, just before he was shot."

Ellen didn't understand about the priest and, Cabot noted, she made little effort to try.

It was evening now, and they were in her suite at the Reforma, bathed free of the dust and grime of Teohihuacan.

The Reforma suite, and Ellen's warm availability emphasized by a gown that revealed what the pockets of her safari shirt had hidden – should have delighted him. But somehow it failed.

In spite of the undebatable plus values, he resented her staying in the chic and expensive hotel, resented her father's money, which kept her in comfort and luxury while her fellow dig-mates holed up in grimy second and third rate hostels. Many of them, like Cabot, were working their way through college and were prepared to undergo real privations in order to gain the benefits of this summer in Mexico, with its prized archaeological credits.

He had mentioned this to Ellen, but her attitude was pragmatic. With a laugh and a toss of her head, she had said, "Just because my father has money, am I supposed to wear ▪ hair-shirt?"

Ellen's logic was unassailable in certain areas. There was really no reason why the girl he loved should sleep among the cockroaches and eat stale tamales three time a day, just because *he* did.

But in other areas Ellen was less reasonable.

Fingering the fold of his lapel, and inclining her head

close enough so that he was aware of the scent she was wearing, she said matter-of-factly:

"Of course you are coming to Chichén-Itzá with the rest of us."

Cabot drew away from her, almost roughly. "We've already had the final conversation on that subject."

"But Cabot . . . without completing this field trip you won't have enough credits to graduate."

"So?"

"We *are* going to be married, aren't we?"

"What has that got to do with me passing up Yucatan?"

Ellen at times had an expression that reminded Cabot uncomfortably of her father – a set look, a look of try-to-cross-me defiance.

"When you get your diploma in June Dad has promised to get you an assistant-professorship. We'll be married, and I'll be a faculty wife. . . Oh, I don't want to be rich and stuffy and haughty and horrid; please understand that, Cabot. I just want to spend my life around people who think, and read, and study, and talk things over. I want to be proud of you. I want to brag about you, and your magnificent brain, and all the things you have done and can do, the books you're going to write and the speeches you'll make. I'm an impatient wench. I don't want to postpone our lives for a whole year and set back the timetable just because you want to follow an impossible dream. Your Father Pro died over twenty years ago. Why are you so obsessed with involving yourself in a life that ended before you were born?"

Cabot smiled and tried to take her in his arms. "Your Quetzalcoatl died unknown centuries ago. Why are you so obsessed with involving yourself in his life?"

"Because this is a study, a career, a future for both of us together. The Toltecs left monuments, artifacts . . ."

"Father Pro left an idea . . . a dream," Cabot answered softly.

Later, standing alone under the stars in Chapultepec Park, Cabot pondered the problem. Ellen could understand

abstract facts, but he couldn't help wishing it weren't so difficult for her to grasp abstract ideas.

Frowning, he cast about in his mind for the best possible way to make Ellen understand. The seven letters in his brief case spelled more than ■ involvement; they were ■ responsibility.

Thinking of Ellen's father, and certain problems he presented, with his wealth, his prestige and his utterly maddening warmth and personal charm, Cabot contrasted him with his own father. Ellen's father, he thought with ■ trace of bitterness, could afford to be generous.

To Cabot, his own father was only ■ legend. He had died some months before Cabot was born – but not until the legend had been launched. Cabot's mother had revealed it to him by bits and pieces, through the succeeding years, years of poverty and frustration. She tried to conceal the gnawing bitterness, but it was there.

For Joe Ames had followed ■ mirage, a crazy illusion that had led him away from the comfort of a congenial job and a pleasant and satisfactory marriage.

His dream had taken him to Mexico.

A colorful era, Mexico in 1927. The dashing young Colonel Lindbergh, fresh from his triumphant overseas flight, was courting Anne Morrow, daughter of the United States Ambassador to Mexico. Will Rogers, the American humorist, was taking his place beside diplomats and aristocrats in one of the Mexican capital's most brilliant social seasons.

. . . And churches were being closed down, burnt. . . And priests were being shot. . .

The New York Herald-Tribune had sent Joe Ames to Mexico City to cover the international romance, the skill of Ambassador Morrow in pacifying Mexican demands that the vast oil fields, now in American hands, be nationalized. The Ambassador had minimized the corruption of American politicians from the cabinet level on down during the Harding administration, with its odorous Teapot Dome scandal, and sold them all on the basic righteousness and decency of President Silent Cal.

But Joe Ames, assigned to these and other stories, had found the "ecclesiastical reforms" of deeper interest, particularly when these "reforms," described by the government in glowing terms, were based on grand larceny, arson and murder.

While Will Rogers was delighting other reporters with his homespun chatter on life with the Cuernavaca set, Joe was presenting searching questions to El General, the man charged with seeing that the "ecclesiastical reforms" were implemented.

In time, Joe's inquiries centered around a little priest, one Miguel Pro who, it was said, never was sure he ought to be a priest. His interests and talents seemed to lie more in laughing and singing and playing the guitar, and clowning and delighting people with his jokes, his native gaiety. But Father Pro, once he had taken his vows, was determined now to keep them – right up to the firing squad wall, if this was to be his destiny.

After a massive manhunt in which Miguel Pro had become a legend in his own time, administering sacraments directly under the noses of the hotly pursuing army, he had at last been caught. He was sentenced to death without a trial, along with his brother Humberto, who had been likewise doomed as an "accomplice."

Joe Ames had spent the last night with Miguel Pro in his cell, and during those long hours he knew, with a deep inner conviction, the strength, greatness and immortality of the little priest who had affectionately been called "God's Jester."

Father Pro had written seven letters, there in the final lonely hours in his cell, and had made a last request of Joe Ames. He asked that they be delivered by hand. And Joe had given his word to the death-marked man.

What nobody could have predicted was the awesome procession of mourners who gathered at the prison gate to follow Father Pro's funeral cortege. A procession of thirty thousand, bearing lighted candles and wailing a dirge for their lost hero in complete defiance of the police and the government.

El General was furious. Foreign agitators had worked up the populace, he raged. Foreign agitators would be expelled – immediately.

He invoked the infamous "Clause 33" of the Constitution, which permitted him to expel any foreigner deemed undesirable, without cause and without notice.

By 9 a.m. the following morning Joe Ames was on his way to the border, escorted by two burly government policemen, his passport permanently revoked.

Of the seven undelivered letters Cabot Ames knew nothing until after his 21st birthday. He knew, from his mother's accounts, that Joe Ames left his job in disgrace, fired because he had created an embarrassment between his paper and the Mexican government.

He found it difficult to find work as a newspaper reporter, but at first this did not seem to bother him, much to his wife's chagrin. He seemed to have one obsession – to somehow forge a passport and get back to Mexico and keep his promise to Father Miguel Pro.

Mary Ames was now pregnant with Cabot and was embittered by her husband's dogged insistence on serving Father Pro at the expense of his expanding family. Her bitterness was short-lived; Joe Ames found a reportorial job on a Friday, and was killed by a bomb thrown during a riot he was covering the following Monday.

Cabot Ames, with only a legend for a father, was born in a Manhattan hospital on Oct. 24, 1929, while tycoons were throwing themselves out of office building windows during the worst financial debacle of all history.

Mary Ames didn't tell her son about the letters. In some way they seemed an integral and inseparable part of Joe Ames, the dreamer, the improvident champion of lost causes.

Cabot found them quite by accident, not long after his 21st birthday, in going through the effects of his mother who, after suffering twenty-two years of a broken heart, had finally succumbed.

Ellen Scott, fuming over her fiance's recalcitrance, did

not know that he had already covered considerable groundwork in the quest that was separating them. Through friends at the American Embassy, through students at National University, through bishops and harlots, magistrates and thieves, Cabot had discovered, in general, the whereabouts of the seven people.

Ana Gomez-Pro, Miguel's sister, a middle-aged widow, worked in a tea room in Cuernavaca. Roberto Pro, his younger brother, the youthful idolator of Humberto the militant and Miguel the man of peace, was now working obscurely as a bookkeeper-clerk; the glory that touched his two brothers as they faced the firing squad had never touched him.

Colonel Amadeo Marinos, the once proud and powerful head of El General's elite cadre was now driving a Mexico City taxicab.

Time seems to stop in Concepcion. Here Cabot found the aging Senora Altera, cloistered in her wealth and aristocracy, impregnable in the confines of her hacienda with the same fanatically loyal household staff – now as aging and fragile as the Senora herself – pledged to maintain her security and her aloofness. To Senora Altera, the life and death of Father Pro would be only yesterday.

Laurette Blanca was easiest of all to locate. Ask any taxi driver, any news vender, any man on the streets, where would one find a woman named Laurette; ask it with a knowing smile, and you would be directed at once to the luxurious establishment of Madame Laurette – still tantalizing, still incredibly beautiful – but no longer a woman of the night. (This work was now done by the legions of girls she controlled.)

Finding Ramon Ortego was much more difficult. He was only eight years old when he had been forced by Colonel Marinos to reveal the final hiding place of Father Pro. Things had gone wrong with him from that time forward. Driven by some all-comsuming need for redemption, he had allied himself with the lost ones, championing their hopeless causes. Unscrupulous labor leaders, anarchists, all found



in him an eager cat's paw. He was now serving an indeterminate sentence in a Veracruz prison on a somewhat clouded conspiracy charge.

El General was dead. Cabot had to do little research to uncover this fact. He had been dead for several years, the ultimate victim of an assassin's bullet. The bullet for which Father Pro and his brother were wrongfully executed, finally found its mark, many years later.

But who was there to receive El General's message posthumously? His widow and daughters – long a family in name only – had now taken up their permanent residence in Spain. . . There had been a mistress. Everyone knew this, even back in 1927, and there were still those who remembered. Senorita Josina Vargas-Salazar. She still lived in the elegant pink and white Cuernavaca villa where El General had established her many years before. Those who knew her well, or even moderately well, spoke of her in riddles.

"Ah yes, Senorita Vargas-Salazar," said the chic matron who edited the society page of Mexico City's largest daily newspaper. "She is one to reckon with. . . Maybe she will see you, maybe she won't. . . One doesn't easily outgrow power."

There, under the stars of Chapultepec, Cabot thought of all these people, so strangely diverse, yet joined by a curious common denominator. They were all people whose lives had touched Miguel Pro, who had molded and shaped his destiny for better or worse, who had played an inexorable role in the unfolding drama which finally reached its climax at the bullet-pocked firing wall of the barracks prison.

He watched three curls of smoke that twisted lazily upward into the moonlit sky, all from volcanoes hovering not far from the city. Popocatepetl, Iztaccihuatl and Xinantecatl. And there was the other one, Piñon – the forgotten one, now quiescent but which, according to the geologists, would some day destroy Mexico City. Would Father Pro be remembered, long after the Reforma Hotel, the Chapultepec Palace and the Palacio Nacional were a

rubble of broken artifacts?

He thought of Mexico City's earlier destruction. He thought of Montezuma living in flowery splendor among the lily ponds and gardens of ancient Tenochtitlan, doomed with the coming of the conquistadores.

He thought of the long-lost burial chambers and stairwells of Palanque, snatched back from their millennia of slumbering in the pervasive jungle where for centuries they had heard only the chattering of the parrots and the screaming of the monkeys.

He thought of the sacred well of Chichén-Itzá and the bones of sacrificial maidens it had yielded to those who came centuries later to dredge up the depravity of the Mayas.

He thought again of *Noche Triste*, the Sad Night of Cortes when he and his men, fleeing the pursuing Aztecs, stumbling their way to safety in the dark over the breeched causeways, were forced to jettison their precious hoard of gold into the black, engulfing marshes.

He thought of the lonely, stark columns of Mitla, forsaken except for humming birds and dragon flies . . . the vast Lacandon forest of lowland Chiapas, the burial vaults at Comalcalco, the monoliths at Copan standing like lonely sentinels against the aloof sky.

All these places had known orators, warriors, statesmen, poets; all of them had seen beauty, ambition, glory; had nurtured those who had loved and dared and suffered and died . . . and now there was so little left. A few carvings on a stucco wall . . . some red clay figurines in unmarked tomb shafts . . . crumbling flights of stairs leading upward to nowhere – and over them all, the jungle, waiting like a huge, patient monster to claim back its own.

So little left. . . . .

And then he thought of Father Pro.

When he died, he left behind no artifacts, no pyramids or monuments, no remnants of his deeds in bronze, stone or clay. His only legacy was seven sealed letters, destined for seven diverse people whose lives had touched his, two decades before.

But was he not something more? An idea, perhaps, a concept? Would something of him remain when the last volcano erupted, when the last hydrogen bomb had been detonated?

These were the things Cabot Ames had to learn in the dusty, dry, long-ago summer of 1950.

II

ANA PRO

The picture-postcard streets of Cuernavaca, meandering lazily through a riot of bougainvillea and oleander, often have a somnambulistic effect on the visitor.

Cabot Ames experienced the strange sensation of sleep-walking as he wandered past row after row of gaily-pastel houses which, with their red-tile roofs, made them appear more like the set for a film extravaganza than a setting for real, human lives.

He turned down one of the streets that angled off the Calle Apulche and discovered a series of "tea-room" type restaurants, patterned after the similar establishments that attract wealthy dowagers in the States. Cuernavaca was full of wealthy retired Americanos, Cabot remembered. On this narrow, travel poster street, expatriate women of wealth could enjoy the same chicken-a-la-king-in-pattie-shells, the same dainty wedges of chocolate cake that they had

previously enjoyed in Ye Tea Shoppes that dot the New England landscape.

Checking again the address in his notebook, he entered one of them and came face to face with Senora Ana Gomez-Pro. This was Miguel Pro's sister.

He knew at once it was she. Not alone because he had been clued in advance to expect an aristocratic, somberly-clad woman who was able, through her faintly disdainful air, to make her post of cashier-hostess seem more like that of chatelaine of a castle. But more importantly, because he recognized in her arresting face, with its high Indian cheek-bones, the kind of distinction that had to belong to the kinfolk of Miguel Pro.

"Please forgive me for intruding in a personal area, Senora," he said. "And please do not be alarmed or upset by what I am about to tell you. I am an American student. My father, Joseph Ames, once knew your brother, Miguel Pro. . ."

The woman in black stiffened and stared at him intently. "Si?"

"I have a message to you from your brother. He wrote it in prison. I regret that I am delivering it 23 years late; this is due to circumstances beyond my control."

He watched the woman as she tore open the sealed envelope and read the letter. Her face seemed completely impassive; this composure, he later learned, was part of a redoubt of stoic defenses that had been many years in the building.

When she at last put it down, she gazed steadily at Cabot through eyes that didn't really seem to see him. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart, Senor Ames," she said. "The things my brother has told me are perhaps things I needed badly to know."

"Could you talk with me for a while?" Cabot asked. "If not here, perhaps I could see you later, when you are off duty. . ."

"We can talk here," she said. "This is the siesta hour and we are not busy. Please join me at one of the tables; I will

have Marguella bring us a bottle of wine. . . Now. What are the questions you want to ask, Senor Ames?"

"I don't know, in terms of little questions. There is just one big question; *who was Father Pro*?"

"Come with me, please. I will tell you about my brother."

We spent our childhood in Concepcion del Ora, Ana began. There were four of us children; I was the youngest. Roberto was next; then came Miguel, and Humberto was the oldest.

Our father taught us to be proud of the Indian blood that flowed in our veins. Most of the Indians had been banished to the fields and the factories since the time of the coming of the Spaniards. But our family was different. Father had gone to the University, and he worked his way up to become director of a mine. Our mother became a leader of society. She mingled with people like the Alteras, who were thoroughbred aristocrats. Senora Altera's Spanish lineage went back to the Middle Ages. Her mother had been one of the ladies-in-waiting for the Empress Carlotta in the star-crossed Court of Maximilian. Her grandfather was said to have been the richest man in all Mexico. Yet Senora Altera, secure in her unassailable position, saw nothing amiss in socializing with the beautiful and charming wife of a *mestizo*.

We lived in a beautiful villa. One night, when the trouble between the Government and the Church was just beginning, soldiers came and burnt it to the ground. We didn't even have a chance to save our clothes or our jewelry; mother saved only a crucifix. We were lucky to save ourselves.

I can remember standing there with my parents and my brothers, watching all of our beautiful childhood memories go up in flames. I was crying; the rest were just staring in stunned disbelief.

I was about to receive my first communion, and I could only think of my beautiful confirmation dress and the









mantilla that came all the way from Spain, going up in the flames. "Now I can't be confirmed," I sobbed.

It was then that Miguel – or "Cocol", as we called him, put his arms around me and told me not to cry.

"But no priest will confirm me and give me the blessed sacraments – in a nightgown."

"Never mind, little sister," he said. "When I grow up I will become a priest and give you the sacraments myself."

Humberto started to laugh – but it was a laugh that was close to hysteria. "Cocol, a priest! When they let clowns in the clergy, I'll help close the churches."

Our father was very angry; he dealt Humberto a blow that sent him sprawling on the ground. "Do not say things like that, even in jest."

Poor father. Our beautiful villa was burning to the ground. We had no clothes on our backs – only the nightgowns we were wearing. But he had to preserve the family decorum.

Senora Altera took us in, made a home for us until father could get us established elsewhere. We children were a little afraid of her at first. She stood very erect, and she wore her grey hair piled high on her head, with a silver diamond studded comb holding it in place. Mother would not allow us to run through those white-tiled corridors. Even the courtyards were forbidden territory. Senora's gardeners groomed them with consummate care. You never saw a faded leaf or a rose whose petals had dropped. Everything was perfection.

Senora had long, tapered white hands and their deep veins stood out like hallmarks of her aristocracy. Cocol told us that Spanish blood was different from Mestiza blood. He teased and joked and clowned, but in the end, he was Senora's special pet.

He never tired of hearing her tell of the past, of the brilliant court of Carotta and Maximilian.

In Senora's most elegant sala was a gold-leafed curio cabinet; her grandfather had brought it from Madrid. In it were relics of the great world outside of Mexico. A fan that had once been Queen Isabella's . . An ivory Buddha from

Lahore. . . Jade bracelets from Canton.

But most marvelous of all were the seashells. Senora, with her long, white, blue-veined hands, would hold them to Cocol's ear. "Listen," she would say, "This is the voice of God."

And Cocol – who was always my champion, my defender, would say: "Let Ana hear the voice of God, too." Then Senora would smile, and hold the seashell up to my tiny ear.

Cocol entered the Society of Jesus when he finished high school. Senora Altera, I think, arranged it. She knew bishops and archbishops and cardinals, and all the august company of the higher clergy.

Father was delighted. . . But Mother, dear Mother . . . I don't think she was quite sure. Cocol had always been so full of life, so full of joy. My mother was a very religious woman, but I think she wanted Cocol to have a woman, a wife, sometimes, the way my father had had her. I think she thought that kind of happiness would be best for Cocol. I think she wanted grandchildren who would have his fun and laughter in their eyes.

As for my other brothers; Humberto thought it was all a big joke, and poor little Roberto didn't know what to think. Roberto idolized both my older brothers. Humberto was the strong one; he starred in all the athletic things. Cocol starred in debate, composition, all the quiet, thoughtful things. Roberto was big, strong Humberto one day – brilliant, witty Miguel the next. He never learned who he really was.

Miguel started his vocation in the Novitiate of El Llano. Through Senora Altera we heard of some of his escapades. He loved to play the guitar and to sing, and the other novitiates loved to listen to him. Even the reverend fathers enjoyed these intervals, just after the evening meal and before the beginning of evening orisons.

One time Cocol was singing a very gay song indeed. It ended with a little dance and a bow so low that his tunic flew high over his head. There was a deathly silence, and

when he finally looked up it was to stare directly into the cold, forbidding eyes of the Bishop himself, who was paying a visit to the Novitiate.

The Bishop laughed and laughed as he told the story to Senora Altera later, over a glass of cognac. But he was very stern with Cocol.

Later, the Rector had a heart-to-heart talk with my brother. Cocol told him about his doubts. "Father, I don't feel right. I have many qualms. Perhaps I made a mistake. Maybe I shouldn't be here."

"It is true, this is a dangerous time to be a priest, my son," the Rector replied.

"Oh Father, I don't mean that. I mean I'm not right to be a priest. I have no dignity. My hands – they are not the hands of a priest."

The Rector told him it was not a question of the hands; it was a matter of the heart.

As it turned out, Cocol's days at the Novitiate were, indeed, numbered. But it wasn't because he wished to escape the vocation and renounce his vows. A band of soldier-brigands, drunk with power and rum, came galloping up in the night and demanded money and treasure. The Society of Jesus is a poor order, but there were gold altar pieces and some small coins in the alms box. The Rector had hidden the money and the gold pieces, but once the soldiers had them in their possession, they shot him in cold blood. They set fire to the building and galloped round and around the flames, throwing their empty rum bottles through the stained glass windows that had been brought over from Spain a century before. My brother risked his own life to try to pull the wounded Rector to safety, but it was too late. Just before he died he told Cocol that his was a true vocation, that he had important work to do, and that God would show him the way.

Cocol had been shielded, first with us in the home, and then in the seminary. I believe that this was the first time he really realized that the government was out to destroy the Church. He said his first Mass, he told us later, on his











way back to Concepcion from the burned-out Novitiate and the body of his Rector.

"I was lying on my back in the grass," he told us, "trying to get the strength to see me home. "Suddenly, on the other side of a hedge, I saw the Blessed Virgin passing by. I thought it was a vision at first, but Our Lady's progress was too bouncy. I got up and peeped over the hedge, and found it was a church statue, broken and crumbling, riding on the shoulders of a villager.

"I said 'Good morning, my friend. Don't you know it's dangerous to be walking about with a lady of that kind?'

"He must have thought I was an undercover man for the Army. He told me he found it in a garbage heap, and was taking it home, only as a toy for his little ones.

"I knew he was lying, but I offered to help him carry it home." He looked at me with fright in his eyes. "You are a policeman in disguise, Senor? You are playing with me?"

"No, no, my friend," I told him. "I'm a student at the seminary – or I *was* a student at the seminary until the soldiers came last night and burned it down."

"You are a priest?"

"Only half of a priest, my friend. Whether I ever become the other half depends upon whether I can get safely off this road and back to town before I am recognized."

"He stared at me in awe. 'It is such a great thing to be a priest, even if only half of one. Father, if I hide you in my home until it is safe for you to proceed, will you say Mass for my family and friends?" . . .

I think Miguel knew from that moment on that the path of his destiny was marked, Ana Pro went on with her narrative.

When Cocol finally made it back to our home we were overjoyed. Word had already come to us of the burning of the seminary and we were wild with fears for his safety.

What a happy reunion we had. Miguel played his guitar and we all sang, and Mama baked a cake for the occasion. But when there came a knock at the door, late that night,

we were all frozen. That was the way it was in Mexico in those days. A knock at the door at night could mean imprisonment or death.

We heard a strange voice, half-man, half-boy. "My name is Luis Velchis. I am ▪ messenger. I have ▪ private letter for someone in this house. Will you open, please?"

Of all of us, Humberto was the cautious one. He had already served his apprenticeship with the Cristeros. He told the boy to shove the message under the door.

The message was for Cocol. It was from representatives of his Order. He was to meet someone in the Plaza next morning who would give him instructions for an important assignment.

"Stay with us, Miguelito," Mama pleaded. "These are dangerous times, and you will be safe here."

Humberto brought his fist down on the table. "Stay with us and be in *danger*, along with us. This is not ▪ time to be safe. Our League is going to fight El General. Even Roberto is helping. We need you more than the Church does right now."

"But I have already said my vows to become a priest."

"It is ▪ time for soldiers, Miguel."

"I do not think I would make a very good soldier. The time always comes when a soldier must kill."

"If someone does not intervene, soon every priest, *all* priests will be killed. Tell Cocol what we learned yesterday, Roberto."

My other brother, the little one, was not even out of high school, and already Humberto had recruited him into the Cristeros.

"They have the Church's files," Roberto said. "They know the names of every priest and seminary student in all Mexico."

"You hear that, Miguel? How long do you think it will be before they come looking for you? They have ▪ special division of police whose only job is to find you, and the other idiots like you. They've already killed four of you, right here in Concepcion, in less than ▪ week. They go from town to town just to make sure the terror never lets up. It

was their men who set fire to the seminary and murdered your Rector. And you're content to hide behind your cassock and let these things happen."

Mama, who always could read Cocol's mind, knew he was suffering. "Silence, Humberto," she said. "That will be enough."

"All right, Mama. But you don't know the danger he is in. Leave the Church, Miguel. Stay here with us. You know in your heart you're not sure – so now is the time to stop."

"I wish it were as simple as that," Miguel said. Then, suddenly his mood brightened. "There are other weapons to fight with besides guns."

"Guns are the final ones," Humberto answered.

"Ah, my brother, that is where you are wrong. El General, and all he stands for, might be destroyed faster by ridicule than by a bullet. Look!" – Cocol's face was suddenly transformed from deep solemnity to an expression of irrepressible fun. It was a look we were all too familiar with; from childhood onward, it had signalled some madcap stunt, some whimsical caper that was Cocol's stock in trade.

He had marked a large circle on Mama's white linen tablecloth with the flat side of a knife.

"This is El General," he said, showing the baggy eyes, the abbreviated moustache, the jowls that any Mexican schoolboy would recognize at once. "We will paint them on hundreds of colored balloons. We will release them all over the city. People will find them and laugh. Big men like El General, they do not like to be laughed at. His popularity will dive."

Even Humberto couldn't repress a smile – but he extinguished it quickly.

"Balloons!" he exclaimed contemptuously. "It's guns, bombs that Mexico needs now, not balloons! All you can think of is to make a joke! And all you want is to be a fat monsignor, feeding pigeons in the plaza."

Cocol said, "Well, I've always liked pigeons." But Humberto wouldn't allow him to laugh it off.

"You care nothing about Mexico, or freedom!"

Cocol grew very serious, then. "I care so much about Mexico that I don't want it done your way."

For a moment it looked as though there would be a genuine rift in our family. But Mama stepped into the breach hastily:

"Please, please, my sons. . . Let us have peace, at least in our own family."

She sent me to the kitchen to get more coffee, and when I returned Cocol and Humberto were hugging each other.

"I give you my promise," Cocol was saying. "If I don't make it as a priest, I'll come back and join your League . . . on just one condition."

"And what is that?"

"On condition that you allow me to paint the balloons."

Later that evening Mama summoned Cocol to her room. Hanging above her bed was the crucifix she had rescued from our burning home, years before.

"Cocol, you are still a child to me. I must know if you have doubts, still, about joining the priesthood."

"I'm afraid, Mama," he told her. "Oh, I'm not afraid of being shot – at least I do not believe that I am afraid of that, though maybe when I have a bullet hole in me I will find out differently."

"Do not joke about such things, Son."

"Mama, to be a priest is such a great thing. To celebrate Mass, to forgive sins – that is to stand in the place of God. Me? Cocol Pro, the clown, the minstrel! It is ridiculous."

"It is a great honor, my son."

"I am frightened of honors."

"Do you not think the good God knows what He is doing?"

"I am sure He does. That is why He has given me these doubts. You see, Mama, when the soldiers came to the novitiate, I thought: Ah, ah, God goes to all this trouble only to prevent Miguel Pro from even thinking he should become a priest."

"Mexico is suffering now, my son. Maybe it needs more

priests like you – men full of joy who can laugh and make others happy. Miguel, God does not want only priests with long faces."

"But how many people will go to heaven only because I play the guitar and sing foolish songs."

"Sometimes the work of God is done with a smile and a song and a happy heart. Maybe that is God's plan for you."

The next morning we all knew, by the expression on Cocol's face that he had irrevocably made up his mind. There was about him a sort of blithe relaxation, as though something very heavy that had been pressing down upon him had at last been removed.

It was clear that all the rest of us were worrying more about the letter, and whether or not it was a trap, than Cocol himself.

He went to the barn and brought out an old bicycle. None of the boys had ridden it since they entered high school, and it was now rusty and dusty and decrepit. But Cocol blew up the tires, and after a few false starts on our cobblestone street, managed to keep himself upright. He wobbled about in an eerie circle, but once he had established his balance, he waved back at us just before he rounded the corner.

Cocol's instructions were to wait by the fountain in the plaza. A news vendor, hawking his wares, came close and whispered under his breath:

"Keep looking up at the cathedral and listen to me, Miguel Pro."

Cocol obeyed while the hawken shouted his headlines again in a ruse to avoid attracting notice.

Cocol approached him with a coin in his outstretched hand and took a paper; the transaction gave the news vender an opportunity to tell him to be back Friday morning at eight. "Buy another paper from me. Your ticket and travel documents with instructions will be inside. You are to go to California to continue your studies.

It had never occurred to Cocol that it would be his destiny to leave Mexico. He loved his land and its people.

To go to a strange country, away from family and friends, was to him more frightening than to face El General's hostile army.

All alone, he went into the abandoned cathedral. The building was empty, the altar stripped, the niches for the statues empty. Where stained glass windows had once been, there were now just gaping holes of shattered glass. The only illumination were shafts of moonlight coming through the higher windows which had not been boarded up.

Cocol then heard a voice intoning: "Those who profane the house of God will suffer the wrath of the Almighty."

He thought it was a ghostly voice at first; no clergyman would dare to enter this barred and posted shell of a cathedral. He moved closer, and saw to his astonishment that it was the Bishop himself. He was wearing full formal vestments, including the mitre, and carrying a crozier in his hand.

Cocol wanted to warn him. "Your Excellency!" he began. The words were frozen on his lips as the door opened and two soldiers entered, silhouetted by the dim light outside. Seeing the Bishop, they drew their rifles.

There was no doubt that the bishop had seen them. He faced them now, arms outstretched, and continued without changing inflection:

"They will be destroyed! Blown like chaff before the wind. . . I am the majesty of the Church.". . .

The rifles crackled and the Bishop fell to the floor.

Cocol stifled an involuntary gasp from the shadows, where he remained out of their line of vision.

The soldiers tensed and readied their guns. Then, hearing nothing more, one of them said:

"We got a Bishop; that's good enough for one night."

Cocol knelt beside the body of the old man. This was the same Bishop who had frowned at his antics at the seminary and later recounted them with a laugh as he shared a glass of cognac with Senora Altera, his old friend.

Cocol felt his heart; then took away his hand. It was stained with blood. The valiant old man was dead.





when I get back. If Humberto and Roberto give you troubles, I'll refuse to absolve them." Then he grew very serious. "If it is God's will," he said, "I will be a priest when I come back."

Ana Pro poured another glass of wine for herself and Cabot Ames as she continued her narrative.

The Church had big plans for Cocol. He was not to become just an ordinary priest. Sometimes we wondered whether the Holy Father himself had heard word of our brother's unusual talents, his capacity for happiness and laughter and infinite love.

He studied at Los Gatos in California for two years, and then he was sent to Spain. His schooling in Spain was lengthy and arduous. When long intervals elapsed between letters, we knew that his studies were absorbing all of his energies.

We didn't tell him when Papa died, and soon after, when Mama herself passed away. We didn't want to fill his heart with grief while he was far away from his home, and all the things that he loved.

He was finally ordained at Enghein in Belgium in 1925, and returned to Mexico at last, to find himself a part of the inevitable climax that was approaching in the conflict between the government and the Church.

When Cocol left for California we had no idea how many years would elapse before we would see him again.

As usual, he was very gay, and made jokes about his leave-taking. "Promise me you will not grow a single inch while I am gone, little Ana," he said to me. Papa, you are not to put on a single pound; I forbid it. Mama, I've counted your gray hairs and I don't want to see any more.

For fifteen months he carried on his work among the people of Guadalupe. He preached in backyards, garages, dance halls. He said his masses wherever a group summoned him, be it large or small. He functioned as a priest fearlessly, right under the noses of El General and his army.

When they finally caught him, they shot him and my

brother Humberto without a trial. Letters poured in from all over the world. The Ambassadors from two South American countries intervened. But it was futile.

There was a long silence, and Cabot, lost in his own reflections, was not at first aware that Ana Pro had finished her tale.

And when she spoke again, he learned her secret.

"I think that I, too, died the day that my brother died," she said. "From that day forward, my life has been a vacuum."

"I think you are a very beautiful woman, Senora," Cabot said, with honest candor in his eyes. "You are speaking as though your life is over. You should be entering into the very happiest years."

"I had a husband and a son. . . I lost them both."

"Senora. . . I–I am very sorry."

"My husband died," she went on to explain. "He died many years ago. My son, my little boy – I believe he died for me soon after he was born, but I didn't realize it. I didn't realize it till many years later.

"You are looking puzzled, Senor Cabot. Perhaps I should explain that my boy, Juan Miguel, is still living in the world of people, but he is dead to me . . . Marguella, may we have another bottle of wine?"

Ana Pro seemed eager to talk, and Cabot knew instinctively that she was pouring out a tale to him that had been bottled in her heart for many years:

When the midwife told me I had a son, I knew right away that one of his names would be Miguel, and he would grow up to become a priest. When I first looked into his eyes, I knew he was destined for holy orders, and I was filled with unspeakable joy, because I knew that he would one day carry on the work that my beloved brother had left unfinished.

He had the Indian look, the mestizo look of my father. There was none of my mother's delicacy and fineness of

feature, and although the first of his baptismal names was Juan, after my husband, he had none of my husband's fairness of skin. Little Juan Miguel looked exactly like the baby pictures of my brother. I even called him "Cocol" until my husband forbid it. I believe my husband was jealous of my deep devotion to my brother's memory.

I read the holy scriptures to Juan even before he was old enough to understand words. I felt that the holiness of the words I was speaking would permeate his being, even though he could not yet understand what they meant.

Every day I took him with me to Holy Mass, I prayed that he would grow up to be worthy of his uncle's memory. My husband sometimes said I neglected him; he said I loved little Juan more than I loved him. I told him that of course this was nonsense; that all mothers loved their sons, only in a different way.

My husband died very suddenly when Juan was still a baby. People said "It is sad that you will have no more sons and daughters, no playmates for little Juan. But in spite of my grief, there was a strange, secret elation – may God forgive me. Juan would be all mine now, to raise the way I knew would be best. Brothers and sisters and even a father might have distracted him from the holy purpose I had planned for him.

What pride was in my heart the day he made his first communion. And when he was altar boy, my pride and happiness knew no bounds. I lived again our childhood in Concepcion, and the joy my own parents took in their boys, particularly in little Cocol, who seemed always to be closer to God than the rest.

When Juan was fifteen I paid a visit to Senora Altera. The time was coming when she should use her influence to have him accepted in the best seminary, with all the impressive prestige of her connections with the clergy back of him.

To my surprise, she said, "And what is the wish of young Juan?"

I thought, of course, that she knew. Everyone knew that

Juan had been destined for the priesthood from his earliest years.

"Senora," I told her, "Juan could have no greater happiness than to follow in the footsteps of his uncle."

"This would be *your* happiness," she replied, "but would it be Juan's?"

To give her a clearer answer I sent the boy himself to visit her. He had always been a dutiful lad and I knew that his wishes would echo my own.

But Senora Altera – ah, perhaps the old lady was becoming a bit childish. She had set funds aside for my boy's education, and she told me she felt it best for him to enter the university first and have his preliminary training there, instead of going straight into a novitiate.

You see, this gave me a reason to blame the Senora for what happened.

He entered the university at Mexico City very young – for he was a precocious boy. American girls are very strong-willed. They grow up without the restraints of well-bred young Mexican girls. And my boy was inexperienced. He knew nothing of love; how could be, at the age of seventeen?

This young American girl decided she wanted him. At eighteen, she had already been married once; married and divorced! Her father was very rich and could buy her out of an undesirable marriage. And there was no problem of the Church, for these people, they were not Catholics.

Ana Pro stared moodily in her wine and Cabot felt an overwhelming compassion for her. Her personal tragedy was a tragedy of a world that would soon be past. The wheels of social evolution turn a little more slowly in Cuernavaca.

My boy, the one who was to have followed in Miguel Pro's footsteps, eloped. Ana continued with her tale.

The girl must have provided the money, for Juan had none – or very little. Only what Senora Altera gave him, and the small pesos I was able to send him now and then.

They crossed the border at Matamoros and were married by a police magistrate in Brownsville.

"Senora – is not the boy happy?"

Ana Pro shrugged her shoulders. "There is no way for me to know. There was nothing I could say to my son, ever again, after this marriage that was not a marriage, to this girl, who still had a living husband."

"Is he nearby?"

"No, Senor Ames. The girl took him to her home, New York. He became an American citizen through his marriage to her. Her father found him work; he is working in the offices of the United Nations. He writes to me from time to time, but I have never found it in my heart to answer... There is going to be a child now . . .

"Perhaps you should relent, Senora? Cabot said softly. "Perhaps this child will be a boy. Perhaps he will become the priest you wanted your son to be."

Senora Pro seemed lost in reverie. "I raised my little boy only on the lives of Jesus and the saints. I did not even teach him of our own heroes – Hildalgo, Juarez, Diaz. What will he learn from *her*?"

"Maybe he will have boyhood heroes like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. He *could*, you know, and still become a priest. Such things do happen in the States."

Ana Pro pushed her empty wine glass away. "Senor Ames, I believe I have been a very wicked woman. Would you like to hear what my brother wrote me on the eve of his death?"

Cabot nodded, and Ana unfolded the letter, now yellow with age:

My Dear Little Sister:

Today, as you read this, you will be thinking of me as dead. Yesterday, when you came to say goodbye to me through the bars, there were great tears in your eyes. I will not carry this sadness with me. Instead, I will go to my death remembering your eyes, filled with childish wonder, when Senora Altera held the seashell to your ear and said,

"Listen, and you will hear the voice of God." Ana, do you remember?

You must know, my little sister, that although my voice is stilled, the voice of God is everywhere. And you must listen for it. You will hear it in the laughter of your sons and your grandsons. If you but listen, they will speak to you my words of love, which have been silenced. Your children will never be yours, for they belong to the land of tomorrow. But they will build a bridge from their land to yours with the gift of love.

Look forward to happiness, Ana. This sadness, now, will be very brief. Just a blink in the eyelid of God.

Your Cocol

Ana finished reading the letter, folded it meticulously and replaced it in its yellowed envelope. Neither one of them spoke for a long while.

Ana at last broke the silence. "My grandchild will be born this autumn," she said.

"You will like Manhattan in autumn, Senora Pro," Cabot replied. "The leaves dance down the Mall where the children are skating. There is a crispness, a promise in the air. The old men, sleeping in Bryant Park, stir with new memories in their blood. Out in Flushing Meadows the flags whip gaily along the avenue of the United Nations. Soon there will be tall, proud towers in Manhattan where they will find their permanent home. And your son will be a part of the buildings – the building of a bright new world."

"A bright new world," Senora Pro repeated after him.

The siesta hour was over, and Ana Pro was back at her post, greeting the customers like a chatelaine receiving her guests at the castle.

But there was something new in her smile.

"Sadness," Cabot repeated to himself, "is just a blink in the eyelid of God."

III

ROBERTO PRO

"My brothers were both fools."

Roberto Pro, a man who looked older than his fifty-three years, seemed to be lost in reveries, ignoring his guest, the young Americano, Ames.

His reverie was interrupted when Raquella, youngest of his six daughters, brought in a tray with a bottle of Pisco and a glass for each of them.

"History might have a different view," Cabot countered, watching the long, slim legs of Raquella as she flounced out of the room.

"Bah! They fought the System. Each fought it in his own way, but today, one is just as dead as the other. What does anything mean?

"I don't know much about you; that is what I've come to learn," Cabot said carefully. "But from what little my mother told me, my father thought you were a militant,

trained to follow in the steps of your older brother."

"Oh, I joined the Cristeros. I was too young and stupid to know better. Now I know that there is no cause worth fighting for, much less dying for."

Cabot did not belabor the point. He said, "I'm a student, here on a mission to learn all I can about Father Pro and his era. What can you tell me?"

Roberto Pro lit his pipe and then began his story.

You must understand that things were in a transitional state in Mexico in 1927. The people had always been poor, since the days when the conquistadores came and took their gold. There were those who said that all the gold that was left was in the hands of the churches.

Then, early in the century, we had presidents who believed in reform. They believed that roads should be built, and schools should be established, and the children of the peons should learn to read and write.

Their ideas were lofty, but unfortunately, they were impractical. Where would the money come from? The rich could be taxed, but they were only a very small percentage of the people, and if all their money were turned in, there would scarcely be enough to pave more than a few miles of roads.

Our leaders were angry, of course, because so much of their wealth was in the hands of you Americanos. All of our oil wells were controlled by your people; their owners had signed away most of their rights – and Mexico's rights – in long term leases that benefitted only the Yankees.

Our leaders said, "Well, now, we will expropriate the oil fields, return control of them to the people." Such a *tomar por asalto*! You Yankees screamed to the heavens. Your president sent a new ambassador down to us, a man who spoke softly, flattered people in the right places, and was very persuasive in his arguments that the future of the Mexicanos was at the side of their brothers, the Americanos.

Where else, then, was there to look for money to build the roads, the schools?

Mexico had at that time some very smart revolutionaries who were able to convince their leaders that all of the gold of the land lay hidden in the churches. "The churches own everything," they bellowed. "They keep the people in slavery by exacting tribute, so that they can continue adding more and more to their riches.

The archbishops and cardinals live in luxury, while the people starve. The priests build costly cathedrals, while the people live in hovels.

Then came the cry, "Let us burn down the cathedrals and shoot the priests."

You understand, Senor, that these things happened very slowly, over a period of many years. First the cries were just a whisper, and the people laughed at the rantings of madmen. But as the cries grew louder, and the people became more and more accustomed to them, the rantings did not seem quite so mad. In fact, they soon began to sound quite sane.

Before the people knew what had happened, armed police, under the direction of the government itself, were going about destroying the churches, confiscating their property, and killing the clergy. All parochial schools were closed, all seminaries. It was forbidden to enter the priesthood. All foreign priests and nuns were expelled, and heaven help those native-born ones who had to remain behind.

Great groups of horsemen would ride up the church aisles, defile the altars and spit upon the images of saints. And the top clergymen went into hiding. The Archbishop of Guadalajara once disguised himself as a mule drover.

It was only natural that loyal Catholics would put up a resistance. The resistance became most active in the western states of Jalisco, Colima and Michoacan; a group of miltants was formed here whose slogan was *Christo Rey*, Christ is King. They became known as the Cristeros and they took to the hills, becoming as much dreaded, in their own way,

as the forces of the anti-clergy government. They burned government schools and did everything they could to retaliate whenever an act of oppression was committed against the Church and its institutions.

It was a branch of the Cristeros that my brother Humberto belonged to, and tried in vain to get Miguel to join. I belonged to the group – the "League," we called it... But then of course, that was when I was young and foolish.

This was the situation that Miguel ran headlong into when he returned to Mexico after his ordination in Belgium.

He was in hot water right from the start, my crazy brother Cocol! The very first evening he was in town, after being reunited with what was left of the family, he insisted on visiting our parents' tombs in the cemetery. We told him it was dangerous, that his return, as an ordained priest, was probably known, and he was probably being watched.

But Miguel wouldn't believe it. Surely, he said, Mexico wouldn't forbid one of her native sons, home at last after journeying afar, from visiting his parents' grave.

It was Luis Valchis who saved him this time – the same Luis Valchis who, as a little boy, had first brought the news that Miguel was to be sent abroad. Someone had tipped off the authorities that a priest had smuggled his way into the country at Veracruz. There was a sizeable bounty on priests, and it was to anyone's financial advantage to put the finger on them. If Miguel hadn't made good his escape from the cemetery, through Luis Valchis, his work as a priest might have ended before it even began.

Miguel escaped, but my brother Humberto was placed under arrest. There was no specific charge against him; it was enough that he was the brother of a priest newly returned to Mexico.

Amadeo Marinos, El General's chief deputy, had been given a special assignment to round up all the priests within the districts. It was very strange. He and my brother Humberto had been in school at the same time. They

played football together, and dated the same senoritas. It was only a caprice of fate that Amadeo went the one way, and my brother the other.

What strange feelings must have welled up in each of them when they met, face to face, as enemies in the Mexico City prison.

"Playing Cops and Robbers, Amadeo?" my brother asked him insolently from behind the bars.

"I am serving my country now," Marinos replied. "These games are for real, Humberto, and the stakes are high... Tell me where we may find your brother Miguel, and I will turn you loose."

"Go to hell, Amadeo."

Marions was very thorough. He gave careful instructions to the jailer, Larrea, to keep a careful eye on any visitors Humberto might have, just in case one of them should be Father Pro in disguise. There would be a fat promotion in it for him, if Father Pro should be caught.

Miguel, meanwhile, was taken on the rounds of the bars by Luis Velchis. It became a ritual. First of all, Luis would take the bartender aside and ask whether there were any strangers present, anyone he did not know. When the bartender assured him that they were all friends, then and only then would Luis announce that his companion was a priest.

The result was such a confusion! Bottles would disappear behind the bar. Drunks would sober up. Messengers would be sent to hastily summon wives and families. Burlap bags would be placed over windows.

Luis Velchis had with him a real priest, who would say Mass, conduct marriages, baptisms!

Miguel told me many funny stories, during his happier moments, about these impromptu services.

One time a bartender begged him to baptize his four-year-old son Ricco. "For four years the child has flirted with Limbo," the man declared. For four years he has darted in front of automobiles, played with mad dogs, tried to bury himself alive in the rubble of churches and

convents. Every day his Mama and I pray that he will survive, at least long enough to be baptized. Now you have come, good Father, to put an end to our daily agony."

Miguel performed the baptism, and after this ceremony was over the bartender said: "And now, Father, another favor, please? . . . Could you marry the boy's mother and me?"

I tell you these things, Senor Ames, so you can understand how it was with the simple, pious folk, being denied the sacraments. A priest in their midst was like manna from heaven, like rain for a dusty summer. Many of the children had never seen a priest, or heard Mass.

It was at one of these informal gatherings that I first met your father, Joe Ames. He had been writing a series of articles for his paper on the conflict between church and state. El General had given him permission to tour the country and see for himself how the lot of the common man was improved, how the people were rising above what he called the "yoke of the Church." He only intended for the reporter to see what he wanted him to see. 'Escorts' were supposed to be with him at all times. But your father was a very resourceful man, Senor Ames. Somehow he found his way, unescorted, into those little impromptu barroom masses, the dance-hall holy communions.

We all knew that Miguel was being watched, so every meeting he had with the family was held in an out-of-the-way place, perhaps a peon's hut on the outskirts of town. I recall one time when I went with my sister Ana, soon after Humberto was placed in jail.

Miguel was truly disturbed that his brother had been imprisoned purely on his account.

"They would have enough on him if they weren't too stupid to look," I told him. "Humberto has planned insurrections, masterminded revolts, organized League battalions, dynamited bridges – but he was very careful not to get caught. But the charge they have him on now – you will laugh, Cocol!"

"What is it," my brother said.

"Remember long ago, that crazy scheme you had to release balloons all over the city, with El General's ugly face painted on them? Well, Humberto said, Why not do it?.... That is why he is in jail."

Cocol laughed heartily. The priesthood had not diminished his ability to enjoy a huge joke.

Then, like exploding a bombshell, Cocol announced that he was going to the jail to visit Humberto.

We tried to tell him that this was utter madness. We knew that the real reason Humberto was being detained was because the police knew he might be bait that would attract Miguel. It would be suicidal for our brother to walk right into the trap. We told him so.

But Miguel was not one to be dissuaded. He was depressed by the fact that Humberto was in jail, all on account of him. We knew an idea was forming in his mind as we watched him eye the manufacturer's name plate on my bicycle. With his penknife, he pried off the shield and fastened it on the inside of his own jacket.

"Now I am an 'inspector', he told us. "A plainclothes man."

We couldn't help laughing; it was all so ridiculous. Somehow, we didn't really think Cocol would go through with it. But we hadn't yet learned to reckon with the resourcefulness of our priest-brother.

We eventually got the story, second-hand, from Humberto, who in turn had gotten it second hand from one of the guards.

Miguel had walked boldly into the prison, all done up in one of the disguises he was to use so frequently in the months that were to come. He was especially versatile with the mustaches. He had all types – handle-bars, walrus, Kaiser Wilhelm, Charlie Chaplin.

Affecting a military stride, he entered the prison, flashing his "badge," and walked up to the young guard, who was engrossed in a large book on his desk.

"What are you reading there?" he demanded officiously.







"The Regulations Manual, sir," the startled young guard told him.

"Splendid! Splendid! That's the spirit we like to see. Regulations must come ■ second nature. Study is the only way to achieve it."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir!"

Then Miguel flipped a notebook out of his pocket and asked to see Prisoner Humberto Pro.

The young guard respectfully directed Miguel to his cell; Miguel walked crisply down the prison corridor, flashing his "badge" at everyone he met.

One time he was almost stopped. A sloppily dressed guard named Reales made as though to question him. But our Cocol simply said,

"Let's keep the collar buttoned at all times. If it's too tight, move the button. That will relieve it."

At last he got safely to Humberto's cell.

"Prisoner Pro, step over here. A few questions in reference to the balloon incident."

Humberto didn't move from his cot. "If you want to know anything about the balloons – go catch one."

"Enough of your insolence – Brother."

Humberto, recognizing the voice, sprang up from his cot and embraced Miguel through the bars.

"You must get out of here at once," Humberto whispered. "The balloon charge was just a trumped up excuse to lock ■■ up as bait to catch you. Don't let them."

"I'm going to get you out of here," Miguel whispered back.

"Be careful, Cocol, they're watching us."

Out of the corner of his eye Miguel could see the prison official, Larrea, eyeing him closely as he was speaking briefly with Reales. Miguel raised his voice:

"I'll come back tomorrow," he said to Humberto – for the benefit of those two who were watching. "I've had enough lies from you for today."

Always the actor, Miguel went down the corridor making notes in his booklet. He adopted a very preoccupied

air and attempted to pass the two officials without seeming to notice them.

But Larrea was too clever for him. Humberto watched from his cell in helpless dispair as Larrea intercepted him.

"Good day, Inspector."

"Good day," Miguel replied, and continued walking out with his pompous, preoccupied air.

"Oh, Inspector – I'll see you out."

"That's not necessary. Thank you anyway."

"But I insist, Inspector. A small courtesy. Please allow me."

The two of them walked together silently. As Miguel told us later, he knew then and there that the game was up.

As they reached the gate, Larrea stopped him.

"May I see your credentials, Inspector? I am Carlos Larrea, Prison Captain."

Miguel opened his coat lapel hastily to give the Captain a fleeting glimpse of his "badge." Larrea just stood there, holding out his hand patiently. Miguel gave up the sham, removed the bicycle shield and handed it to Larrea.

"You're very resourceful," said the Captain. "I'm amazed at your daring, Father Pro."

"And I'm amazed at your perceptiveness, Captain," Miguel replied.

"You were very foolish to come here," Larrea went on. "I was going to have to release your brother soon, anyway. There isn't enough evidence to hold him. But since you are here, I'll release him sooner than I have to. I'll release him in the morning, in fact – *if* you will do something for me."

"What could a fugitive priest do for you, a great and powerful prison captain?"

Then the incredible happened:

"Will you say Mass at my house tonight – and baptize my baby? My wife would be so happy. And there are others . . ."

My brother was a great believer in signs and omens. He felt that this miraculous deliverance was just another sign from heaven that he must continue with his work, right up

to the gates of prison itself.

Larrea released Humberto from prison, just as he had promised. Our brother returned to us the next day.

Just as Cocol thought that his deliverance was a sign from heaven, that he should continue serving the Church, Humberto was just as sure that it was a sign of warning that he should give up such folly and throw himself body and soul into the work of the League.

Very often they would quarrel about it.

"The League needs you more than the Church, right now," Humberto insisted. You'll get yourself killed for sure, if you continue walking into the face of danger. Our group is becoming much more sophisticated. We're beginning to make El General nervous."

"The things you do make *me* nervous. It's not the right way."

"And what *is* the right way? To say a Mass here and there, and baptize a few babies – while the soldiers are waiting outside with their guns ready? Bah!"

"Do you have any idea how *happy* the people are when they come to me? Even Captain Larrea! That is my way – bring God back to the people."

"The only sure way is to destroy El General first."

"No. The people will find their way, their own way. But they need help, and with me here, there is a beginning."

"One priest alone?"

"That's why I need *you*."

"Me? What can I do? Carry your vestments when you're running?"

"No. . . I just want you to try to understand."

"I will understand, and I'll be behind you. But you must never forget, every breath you breathe as a priest is a dangerous one."

"Do not fear for me, my cautious brother, who risks his own neck every hour of the day! If I can fool the Lord into thinking I am worthy to be a priest, I can fool El General into thinking I am not one."

From that day on, Humberto used the power and influence of his position in the League and his access to its resources to help Miguel in his ministry. When the League got hold of a decrepit old Essex touring car, Humberto used it to take food to Miguel's orphanages, to transport old and infirm people to the secret places where Masses were being said.

In time he even became a sort of unofficial press agent for Miguel, causing it to be known that there was a certain priest who would risk his life to bring the sacraments to those who needed and desired them.

One time he surprised even Miguel himself when he asked him to say Mass for a group of four hundred people. Four hundred is a lot of people. Far too many people to keep a secret. But neither of my brothers had any fear.

I, personally, will never forget that night. The Mass was held in a dance hall. There were big signs posted on the front: DANCING EVERY SATURDAY NIGHT." Crowds of people hung around the entrance. Women scantily dressed in evening clothes, lips and cheeks painted, and flowers in their hair.

Along the street came a mariachi band, making deafening music. And in the midst of them, all togged out like a mariachi musician and playing his guitar louder than any, was my brother Cocol. He was on his way to hold Mass!

"This is going to be loudest Mass ever said," he whispered to Humberto, as he passed him in the crowd.

The four hundred people kept their secret – but the New York Herald-Tribune had a lot to say about it. Your father's articles made the headlines. You can only imagine El General's rage when he read: "CHURCH IN MEXICO IS NOT DEAD. LITTLE PRIEST DEFEATS GENERAL."

By Spring of 1927 the situation was becoming more and more explosive. In April the Cristeros dynamited the Mexico City-Guadalajara train and a hundred passengers were killed or burnt to death. Several priests were observed at the scene of the accident. El General said they were part

of the plot. The Cristeros denied it. The priests were simply administering last rites for the dying, they said.

The religious persecution was intensified. Wealthy Catholics were shot, and their property confiscated for no other reason than that they were Catholics.

With El General, it became a personal vendetta between him and my brother. His pursuit tactics became increasingly severe, and my brother's escapades became more and more reckless.

He gave communion daily to some 300 people; he heard their confessions in barns, half-built houses, cantinas, garages. When the danger was at its height, he gave the Sacraments to 900, 1300 and then 1500 people on three successive First Fridays. El General only heard of these things when he read in the New York paper the stories your father had written. Miguel was elusive as a shadow – yet he was always there when there was a confession to be heard, a marriage to be performed, or extreme unction to be administered.

Humberto, who had once been so opposed to these activities, now was part and parcel of them. They were very open in their operations. I remember one time when Miguel had made one of his periodic visits to Senora Altera's villa. She always gave him money to buy supplies for an orphanage he was supporting or for any other needy case he encountered.

Humberto and I were to pick him up in the Essex on the outskirts of Concepcion. Imagine our shock when we found him standing there with large bundles of food, a crate of live chickens and a burro!

"What are we going to do with the livestock?" Humberto asked him.

"Load it," Miguel replied blithely.

That's just what we did. The burro went in the back seat, beside the crate of chickens. I pulled him from the front and Miguel pushed from the rear. The burro objected, but he really had no choice.

Miguel told us the burro was destined for a farm, where

he was to help out a penniless old man. "You have an intelligent face," he said to the beast. "You are going to be a good farmer, my friend."

The old Essex was certainly well known to the police, and we made it all the more conspicuous without passengers. But God must have taken special watch over Miguel, for we were able to make our deliveries unnoticed. The farmer had his burro, and the children of Saint Lucia's orphanage had food for another week.

We used to discuss, just among the three of us, how long Miguel could hope to continue before he was caught.

"Maybe a moment, maybe forever," Miguel told us. As long as I can wear my mustaches this way – upside down, and this way – right-side up – they will never know who I am.

Even Humberto had to laugh. "You and your mustaches and your funny hats. The only reason God loves you is because he doesn't know you as I do."

"No, Humberto," Cocol told him – and the clown was transformed instantly back to a priest. "It is because He is more forgiving."

Humberto carried a little flask of wine with him. He was always a robust one, ever ready for the uncorked bottle.

He poured his own wine into Cocol's flask. "Here, take my wine. You have many more Masses to say."

Roberto Pro, it seemed to Cabot, was beginning to feel the effects of the Pisco – a very powerful drink.

"All these things happened so long ago. Miguel is dead. Humberto is dead . . . and I, perhaps, am dead too. Dead on my feet.

"Yes, they finally caught both my brothers. Caught them and shot them without a trial. They let me escape – because of my youth, they said. . . But today it is as though none of us had ever lived or died."

"You have six lovely daughters, Senor Pro," Cabot pointed out.





His host's face instantly softened. "Yes – it is for their sakes that I wish I had been more of a man."

"Perhaps you are too hard on yourself... Read the letter I have brought you. Read it, Senor."

Roberto Pro had stuffed the letter in his pocket when the interview began, an hour earlier. It was as though he feared it as something that would bring him pain anew, something that would reopen his wounds, scourge them.

Now he look it out, stared at it.

"A letter from the grave," he reflected. "What could he say to me, twenty-three years ago, that would soften my pain now?"

"Read it," Cabot suggested again.

Roberto swallowed another gulp of Pisco, then tore open the sealed envelope.

It seemed to Cabot that he could detect tears in the eyes of this strange, withdrawn, defensive man. He couldn't be sure.

"I will read it to you," Roberto said when he had finished, "and see what you make of it."

My Dear Roberto:

Your brother and I, who fought our war from different camps, will die together tomorrow. We followed different paths to the same star; yet tomorrow, our communion in our last moments together will transcend words.

Please know, my brother and my friend, that you were spared for a purpose. Men never die or live by accident; everything is by design. There is a reason for all things under Heaven.

Your service to your country and your God, may one day be greater than ours. After all, we will be dead. But you will have many years of health and strength and vigor and high purpose to accomplish the task for which you have been spared.

With my dying wish, now, I ask God's blessing on that task.

Your brother Cocol.

There was a long silence.

Then Cabot said, "You ask me what I make of it, Senor Pro. We have a saying in America that goes something like this: If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem."

"But I am not a man big enough to make solutions. I am just a bookkeeper-clerk. I have spent all my life in the shadow of heroes. My two brothers changed the world; I only live in it."

"Exist," would probably be a better word, Cabot thought to himself. But it was not in his realm to deliver lectures, to moralize.

He rose to go.

"Wait – do not go yet... There is a little matter I should like to discuss with someone. It is a matter I cannot discuss with friends; better it should be a stranger. Let Raquella pour you another glass of Pisco."

"Thank you, no; your Pisco would blow the top off Popocatepetl."

"It is a powerful drink for powerful men. Me, I am not powerful – but just now, when I am past my prime, power is within my grasp."

"I am only a bookkeeper-clerk, Senor Ames, but I work in a very large plant. They employ hundreds of men at sub-standard wages. We spend our lives working, only to starve in our old age. Meanwhile, we can be fired on the slightest of whims.

"I have had my family to think of, my six daughters. So always I say to the bosses, 'Si, Si, Masters.' I do everything they command, so frightened am I of the yellow slip – in your country, I believe it is pink.

Now our plant is being organized by union workers. They say we will have higher wages, an old age plan, health insurance, and there will be a chance to appeal if we are unjustly fired. I have avoided it all like a plague. The bosses will be very angry at those who fight them.

"But my friends are very angry too – angry at me.

Some who used to be friends, now no longer talk to me. There will be a vote, soon. I will vote against the union, they know, because I am afraid to offend the bosses, afraid to lose my job. My vote might be the one that will stop the Union. Do you see my predicament, Senor Ames?"

Not really, Cabot thought to himself. You have only your job to lose; your brothers had their lives. But he was too kind to say it aloud – for this, he knew, had been Roberto's tragedy.

"A man must sooner or later take a stand," he said aloud. "Your time to take a stand, perhaps, has come later in life."

"I might even do more than take a stand," Roberto said thoughtfully. "I might even put up a fight. Become an organizer."

"Such things are not unheard of," Cabot said.

"Si! How did you say it, Senor? 'If you are not part of the solution, you may be part of the problem.' I may just become a solution."

"Bravo," said Cabot.

Roberto Pro rose. "Thank you very much for listening to my troubles, and for bringing me the letter. It will be a nice souvenir to save for my daughters. Of course, what a man had to say, twenty-three years ago, has little relevance today; has it, Senor?"

IV

AMADEO MARINOS

Cabot studied the photograph he had had copied from an original supplied him by an underling in the taxicab company (upon receipt of a small bribe).

A stocky, rather jowly face. Sullen eyes. Age: 55. Height: five feet, four inches; weight: 190 pounds.

He would have expected a taller man. Colonel Amadeo Marinos, one-time chief of El General's elite search-and-destroy corps, should have been more imposing.

But then Amadeo Marinos was no longer a Colonel. He was a Mexico City cab driver. Just one in several hundred.

Marinos' stand would be in the Plaza, Cabot had been told by his informant. It would be simply a matter of checking faces against the photograph.

He did not have to wait long for his quarry. Amadeo Marinos acknowledged his identity with a curt nod.

"I have a message for you. A letter from Father Miguel Pro."

Marinos broke into violent coughing. "Pardon me, Senor. . . It's the lungs. They're not used to such a shock."

"Because of a string of circumstances the message has laid in an attic all these years," Cabot explained. "I am making a belated delivery."

"Wait just a while longer, and Miguel Pro could say what he has to say to me in person," said Marinos. "Ah no, that is not precisely likely. Miguel Pro is surely one of God's pet angels. Me, my appointment is with the Devil."

"I would like to talk with you – about Father Pro," said Cabot.

"Get in the cab and we will turn on the meter. My time is all the more valuable because it is running out."

Cabot smiled as he climbed into the cab and watched Marinos turn on the meter. The man who had once been Colonel Amadeo Marinos, chief of El General's hatchet men, was still tough, he noted.

"The letter was given to my father to deliver," Cabot explained. "But he was driven out of Mexico, and died soon after, so there was no opportunity –"

"No matter," Marinos interrupted, putting the letter into his pocket. "I am not interested in reading what a scoundrel I am. These things I know."

"My father was Joe Ames."

"Oh, so your father was Joe Ames!" Marinos abruptly stopped the meter on the cab and turned about to face Cabot. There was a trace of admiration in his voice as he went on to say, "Your father taught my *General* that the pen is mightier than the sword. He gave me a very bad time, your father did. Not just a routine amount of grief; a really prodigious amount. The grief he caused me deserves more than just passing notice. What is it you wish to know, Senor?"

"I want to find out all I can about Father Miguel Pro, and the part my father played in his life and death."

"I can probably tell you more about Miguel Pro than any living person," he said. "You see, I knew him from childhood."

Marinos' monologue, which ensued, was punctured with fits of coughing. He stifled his coughing in a handkerchief which, Cabot noted, was already red with blood.

"There is talk going about now that Father Pro will be nominated for sainthood," Amadeo began. "This is very funny to those of us who knew him in the early years. Who will he become? Saint Comic? . . .Saint Buffoon? . . .Saint Clown?

"He went to my high school, and I knew him well, although he was several forms behind me. His brother Humberto was in my class.

"Whenever there was any mischief, Miguel Pro was behind it. Oh, he never did anything bad enough to get himself expelled. He was just bad enough to make the teachers smile.

"One time he got into the gymnasium a few hours before a track meet and spread glue on the soles of all the relay runners' track shoes. He allowed just time enough for it to get sticky and tacky.

"Miguel Pro had a way with the women. There was this one girl – Dolores. She would rather sit home and listen to Miguel Pro play his guitar and sing, than go out dancing with me to the finest ballroom in Concepcion. A very shallow girl. Fortunate that I didn't marry her.

"One time when I was about fifteen or sixteen and Miguel was a little younger, a notice was posted with our debating club that a young man interested in politics could find part time work with a rising politico – part time work that might lead to a career.

"Miguel Pro and I were both interested. He probably would have gotten the job, if he had gone after it; he won all the prizes in debate. But Miguel remembered he had promised to play guitar for a singer friend at a fiesta contest that particular evening. . .I went, and got the job. It was working for El General – he was only a Coronel then. I have often thought how different things might have been if Miguel Pro hadn't decided to play his guitar that night.

Perhaps he might have become El General's chief aide, and I might have become the priest. I, the hunter, might have been the hunted.

"But no matter; that is just a passing whimsy.

"I did not think of Miguel Pro again till some years later. He had been abroad, had studied in various countries and had finally been ordained a priest.

"Priests were very unpopular at that time. The churches were taken over by committees of citizens, but we in the government learned that the priests and nuns were still functioning in an illicit way. They still were spreading their superstitions, and exerting their bad influence on the poor people and the ignorant Indians. Many of these Indians still clung to their pagan tendencies. They loved the ritual, the symbolism. El General used to say that even when all the priests were jailed or killed and all the churches destroyed, they would still burn their candles and celebrate dances and fiestas in honor of their local saints. The Indians didn't really need priests – only ritual. I well remember when the Virgin of Guadalupe was believed to have left her sanctuary in the Church and taken refuge in a tree. Thousands of people gathered there to pay tribute to the virgin in the tree, a woman they couldn't see!

"The Church was still managing to extract tribute from these poor, ignorant people, so you can see that El General had to take drastic steps to prevent the dissemination and spread of this nonsense.

"People talk now of 'persecution' – but you should remember that El General did not make the anti-clerical laws; he only enforced them. The laws had been written into the Constitution years earlier, as long ago as 1917, in fact.

"It pained him to note, on the one hand, that road building was stopped because of lack of funds, and public schools were unable to pay adequate teachers – while pesos were pouring into the parochial schools by ignorant peons who still worshipped statues, believed in ridiculous miracles, and still pressed crowns of cactus spines into their

heads and hung heavy iron weights about their legs.

"The whole program of the Revolution was one of enlightenment.

"El General met with the foreign press frequently. He was anxious for them to learn for themselves how well his reforms were working. He wanted the world to know what we had accomplished in Mexico, and the plans we had for the future.

"I had a special assignment from El General to travel about with the press, show what we had done and how effectively we had enlightened the people and abolished medieval customs and beliefs that had been nurtured by the church.

"No offense, Senor Ames, but your father was a contrary one! If there was any situation, any region left where the people genuinely believed in the Church and trusted it and its sacraments, Joe Ames was sure to smell it out.

"This kept me in hot water with El General. He was a man of short temper. One *Ames* headline in the New York paper was enough to churn up his ulcers for days.

"How is it my fault, my General," I would say to him. "Am I supposed to do Joe Ames' thinking and writing for him?"

" '*Yes*,' he would thunder back.

"As a consequence of your father's persistence, I spent most of my time, those days, riding horseback through the provinces and the back-country in search – primarily – for my old schoolmate, Miguel Pro.

"Of all the clergy, Father Pro was giving the government the most trouble. He flagrantly ignored all the anti-clerical laws. He held masses that were openly attended by hundreds of people. He raised funds that completely supported an orphanage; he turned up whenever he was summoned for baptisms, marriages, burials. It seemed that all one needed to do was send word that Father Pro was needed. . .But do you think that I, or any of my highly trained men, could catch him!

"He was an adept one with the disguises and the charades. He had me completely fooled. Once I came face to face with him. We had picked up a rumor that a group of children were to be confirmed near Zumpango. When we got to the spot, we found only a group of wretched ragamuffins playing in the mud with the village half-wit.

" 'We have heard that there is a priest hiding somewhere in these hills,' I said to the idiot. 'Have you seen him?"

" 'I don't know,' he answered. 'What is a priest? What does a priest look like?'

"You see what we had to contend with? This idiot, this village cretin, turned out to be Father Pro himself in disguise. The peons had all helped him prepare for his little charade when they heard our horses in the distance. Even the children were taught to be part of the deceit.

"Your father, a foreigner from far-off New York City, had no trouble finding this trouble-making little priest. It was only us, the constabulary, those who were trained to seek out criminals. It isn't any wonder that El General was beside himself with aggravation.

"And I, of course, was his scapegoat. Each time a new Father Pro story reached the New York headlines, he vented his ire upon me.

" 'How do you explain this – my brilliant, all-knowing, all-seeing Amadeo Marinos, head of my Secret Division? How do you explain that one stupid little priest can defy me? That he can thumb his nose at me and hold a public Mass – without a single hint to my special police of what was going on?'

"All I could say was, 'He seems to have the people behind him, Excellency.'

" 'That isn't the way you presented it to me six months ago, when I asked you the temper of the people and what Joe Ames would find when he snooped through the country.' El General imitated my voice: 'He will find that the people have freed themselves of the yoke of the Church.' Marinos, you are an abominable policeman. If you don't find this Father Pro soon, I'll break you down to the

ranks of the floor sweepers.

" 'Excellency,' I said, 'the best trained men in the country have been working on this assignment night and day.'

" 'Then tell them to work longer! I have been made to look ridiculous in the eyes of the world. The whole world is laughing at me. I want this to end right now. I want this miserable little priest caught and shot. And shoot anyone who helps him! No one in your division is to rest, especially you – until this little bastard is caught.'

"With this diatribe ringing in my ears, my future course was charted. Either I catch Miguel Pro or forfeit my career. It all seems so ridiculous now; either way, I end up a dying taxi-cab driver.

"But at that time I thought I had life by the tail. I had a beautiful wife, two strapping sons and a position of sorts in society. El General wouldn't live forever. I could even see myself in the top spot. Everything depended upon me apprehending this renegade priest.

"My task was doubly difficult because very few of my men knew what Miguel Pro even looked like. It was bad enough that he was unknown to them to begin with – and even worse that he had become so skillful at disguising his features.

"I made a trip to my garret and discovered some old school yearbooks.

"Miguel Pro was in many of the group pictures, because he was what you call in your country, I believe, a 'big activity man.' The best picture, though, was that of the debating society. I was in the picture too. Right there in the front row, looking very serious and dedicated. Miguel Pro, far to the back, was laughing, as though the whole thing were a huge joke to him. Even as I looked at the picture, I felt that he was laughing at me. I could see him, somewhere off on the mesas, or in the cliffs, or in the city slums, grinning that same mocking grin – all for my benefit.

"I felt, then and there, that my quest would soon be over. I would have the last laugh on Miguel Pro, yet!

"I called in my men and ordered the picture to be blown up, and a close-up reprint of Miguel Pro's face made and distributed to each and every member of the police force. I instructed them to visualize this face with and without every conceivable style of mustache and beard.

"I found myself suffering with the same kind of malaise that afflicted El General. I would go berserk with rage when any of my underlings let Pro slip out of his grasp.

"The crowning humiliation was the incident at the barracks prison. We had Humberto Pro confined there, expecting that Miguel would eventually find his way in to visit him. Miguel had the fortitude to present himself as a plainclothes prison inspector; the badge that he flashed turned out to be a bicycle shield.

"His manner was so convincing that he got past several check-points. It was bad enough that he succeeded in hoodwinking the lesser officials, but it was just too much when he was able to deceive Carlos Larrea, the prison captain. I was so chagrinned that I had Larrea thrown into his own jail. If El General had heard of this, we would probably have all faced the firing squad.

"I cannot tell you, Senor Ames, how it depressed me that this clown, this buffoon, could outsmart the keenest minds in the secret police. When I was a very young boy I had great respect for the clergy – that, of course, was before I learned how they were trying to destroy Mexico. But this Father Pro – I knew that if I didn't destroy him, he would end up destroying me.

"Today all this seems so unimportant. But when one is a young man, with life ahead of him, he is occupied with thoughts of advancement and a career and a good life. Is it not so, Senor Ames?

"I had only one thought at the time – that this Father Pro was standing between me and success.

"Perhaps I was too hard on Carlos Larrea – in light of the fact that I myself was hoodwinked also by Miguel Pro. I fell in the same kind of trap as the rest of them.

"We knew that all the Pros were close to Senora

Carlotta Altera. The Alteras were a very fine old family of Concepcion. Senora was one of the last of the family, and the government was watching her very closely. We suspected that she might be giving sums of money to the underground Church, here and there, but because her family had been so distinguished in Mexican history, we purposely avoided harassing her. We knew that unless the laws were changed, on her passing the entire Altera Hacienda and its vineyards could be seized by the State.

"We had a very reliable tip that Miguel Pro was soon to pay her a visit. There was some suspicion that funds from the Altera lands were being diverted to support the Santa Lucia orphanage, which was operating underground since the anti-clerical orders were enforced.

"I personally questioned a most exasperating woman named Margarita, who lived in a shack on the edge of the Altera grounds.

"The line of questioning went something like this. You can see, Senor, how frustrating it was!

"No sooner had I introduced myself when she said, 'I paid my taxes. Why do you come to arrest me?'

" 'I assure you, Senora, I have no thought of arresting you. Is this your home?'

" 'I wouldn't be too sure for how long! My mother lives in Taxco and I may go and move in with her any minute, if my husband brings one more bottle of Tequila into the house.'

" 'Senora! Senora! I asked you only one small question. I don't care about your husband.'

" 'That's all very well for you! You don't have to live with him. I've given him seven of the best years of my life, and –'

" 'I came to ask you about a friend of yours. Miguel Pro.'

" 'Miguel Pro? No! Miguel Tessero I know. He was fired last week from the factory where my husband works. If you call it work. In my opinion –'

" 'Never mind your opinion. I asked about Miguel Pro. He's a priest.'





" 'A priest? I thought that was illegal.'

"You see how difficult it was to question these people. My staff and I got nothing but evasions. Whenever Miguel Pro was within our grasp, there was a conspiracy of smokescreens!

"This time I resolved to catch him in spite of the obstructionist tactics of all those misguided people who would protect him.

"I went directly to the Altera hacienda and demanded to see the Senora at once.

"Her maid, Nita, told me that she was at siesta. More of the smoke-screen practices. But I was not going to be deceived. My men and I forced our way inside, right past the maid.

"While we were scuffling with the maid, who tried to throw herself directly into our path, we heard a very discreet and aristocratic cough on the stair landing. It was Senora Altera.

"I can tell you, you have never seen an aristocrat until you have seen Senora Altera. She was very straight and erect, and not a strand of her silver hair was out of place. When she said, 'What are you – gentlemen – doing in my house?' I was ready to retreat, then and there.

"But I pulled myself together, and said 'Colonel Amadeo Marinos, Senora, at your service.'

" 'If this is the service you are offering me, I do not need any of it. You are behaving like mad dogs in the home of a respectable old lady. How dare you? I'm going to report you to the mayor.'

"I sensed that she might be stalling for time to allow Miguel Pro to get away. So I came straight to the point.

" 'Will you turn Miguel Pro over to me, Senora, with no further delay, and avoid causing yourself some unnecessary embarrassment?'

" 'Have you taken leave of your senses? There is no Father Pro here. I live alone with my maid.'

" 'A priest is an enemy of the State,' I insisted. 'And we have information that he is in this house.'

" 'This is absolutely ridiculous. We Alteras have never been known to harbor an 'enemy of the State.'

" 'Senora – you force me to make a search.'

"My men covered every square inch of the ground floor, opening closet doors, looking inside wardrobes, checking old trap doors. Senora Altera offered to help us, but – as I realized later – it was only a part of her delaying tactics. She offered to show us the location of every trap door to the cellar, every secret passage.

"When at last I had satisfied myself that Father Pro could not be hiding below, I demanded that she escort me to the upper quarters.

" 'Of course, Colonel,' she said. And with a grand sweep of her train, she led us to the upper rooms.

"In the upstairs sitting room was a fragile little old lady she introduced to us as her sister Amelia. She explained that Mellie, as she called her, was deaf and could not speak with us.

"Senor Ames, you cannot imagine such a sweet-faced, delicate old lady. We all felt like *mozo de cordels*, intruding on her privacy, frightening her. She nodded to us pleasantly, then continued with her embroidery.

"Yes, you have probably guessed it. That sweet little old lady, that 'Sister Mellie' was our quarry – Miguel Pro! I swear, the man not only had unlimited disguises, he was able to actually change his face.

"The outfit I could understand; he had merely slipped into one of Senora Altera's garments. But how could a rugged priest, in the prime of his manhood, transform his face into that of a little old lady?

"Senora Altera couldn't resist her little joke. She said: 'Do you still think I may be hiding this priest in some secret chamber? This really is preposterous! Perhaps you think we're all masquerading here, and that I am really Miguel Pro, or perhaps my maid – or better still, my sister Mellie upstairs!'

"If I had known then what I found out later, I would have jailed her and her entire entourage, along with Father

Pro.

"Her parting shot to me was, 'I am an old woman, Colonel. There is very little you can threaten me with.'

"Somehow, in every encounter I had with the people who were sheltering Pro, I came out like the villain. I did not enjoy being a villain. I was merely doing my duty, carrying out the laws I had vowed to enforce.

"Another little joke that Miguel had at our expense was the matter of Laurette Blanca. Mexico City had its share, then, as it does today of these women who prowl the streets seeking out men. I always felt they should be held in tighter control, but my superiors always turned the other way and refused to interfere in their activities. No doubt it was because many of our higher officials – then as now – were customers of these women.

"At any rate, this Laurette was very well known to all of my men. As for me – I knew her by sight.

"The entire city was flooded with the pictures of Father Pro that I had circulated. There was not a man on the force who was not familiar with every contour of his face. The capture of Miguel Pro had top priority within the Department. We let it be known that the man who brought him in would be in line for instant promotion.

"Consequently, every suspicious character, every man of Miguel Pro's height and build, was subject for questioning.

"Many men who were brought in had to be turned loose immediately; the resemblance was only superficial.

"But one of my officers was positive he recognized Pro. He whistled for reinforcements and rounded the corner to trail the man. Imagine his frustration when he observed his suspect making a transaction with Laurette Blanca, and then accompanying her, arm in arm, to her quarters.

"This could not be Miguel Pro, the priest. The man of God who had made vows of chastity and celibacy.

"But was it?

"Some time later we learned that Laurette Blanca had hidden him, given him refuge. She kept him hidden in her quarters while she kept assignations with two different

men, one of them a member of our own police force!

"I felt the woman should be punished, but what could we do? She denied everything.

"In the late autumn of 1927 an attempt was made on El General's life. He was riding to the bull fights with his wife and another couple – people high in the city government.

"A man was seen leaving an old Essex automobile holding some object close to his chest. He had thrown the bomb before anyone realized what was happening.

"Fortunately, his aim was very bad and El General and his party were not hurt – just badly shaken up.

"The anarchist, of course, was captured immediately. It was one Luiz Velchis. He had been identified with the Cristeros; our police had a long dossier on him. The Essex car, also, was owned by Cristeros. We knew that this car had been used extensively by Miguel Pro in his illegal activities delivering food and supplies to the orphans and to the aged. It looked as though at last we had him in our net.

"El General took personal charge of the investigation. We questioned this Luis Velchis; it wasn't too difficult to find out from him what we wanted to know. He fell into the trap easily.

" 'No, no, no!' he kept shouting. 'Father Pro had nothing to do with this. Father Pro is nowhere near; he has gone to Valle de Brava to say last rites for an old lady.'

"Valle de Brava. It was just a small place. It wouldn't be hard to find a dying old lady.

"Within half an hour the police were on their way.

"Humberto, as we learned later, had done his best to dissuade Miguel from making the trip to Valle de Brava. Word of the assassination attempt had leaked out through the Cristeros grapevine. Humberto felt they should remain in hiding.

"But Miguel couldn't resist the plea of an eight-year-old lad to come to the bedside of his grandmother.

"When my men surrounded the house of the old lady, it was filled with family and relatives who had come to mourn. When we broke the door in, all the candles were at once extinguished. There was general pandemonium, with





tables being upturned in the dark, women screaming. That old lady, if she was not dead yet, probably thought she was already at the gates of Purgatory.

"By the time we had a light, Miguel Pro was nowhere to be seen. Two of my men gave chase; the rest brought in an old man and a little boy for questioning. The little boy, Ramon, was grandson of the sick woman.

"It was easy to bring the old man over to our side. We slipped a few pesos in his hand and told him it would be to his advantage to cooperate. 'Tell the boy to tell us what we want to know – then leave him alone with us.

"An eight-year-old boy is no match for the cream of the Mexican secret service.

"I held him on my lap, and spoke to him the way I would speak to one of my own sons.

"I said to him, 'Ramon, do you know how wicked a thing it is to tell a lie?' The lad was crying. This was a very difficult part of my job.

"Then I said to him, 'Ramon, Father Pro is a bad man who has disobeyed our laws. You will be very wicked if you don't tell us where he has gone.'

"The boy was stubborn; he just sat there and cried.

"Then we called back the older man – his uncle, I believe. 'Tell the boy to talk, or you will be sorry,' we instructed him.

" 'Ramon, you must tell the policemen what they want to know,' he ordered the boy. 'It is very wrong to defy a policeman.'

"That is how we found out that Miguel and Humberto Pro had gone to Concepcion to find refuge at the Altera hacienda.

"This time we were too wise to be deceived by another trick. We searched the premises ruthlessly until we found the two Pro brothers, seized them and placed them under arrest.

"A great deal of pressure was placed upon the government from all sides to save the life of Miguel Pro. Even the ambassadors from several South American countries intervened. It was a great amazement to me how important

this little man had suddenly become. To me, it seemed only yesterday that he was putting glue on the track runners' shoes. What had he done to make him an international hero? Say a few Masses? Perform a few marriages and burials?

"The ambassador from your own country did not interfere. He left on a Good Will Tour with your aviator, Colonel Lindbergh, and your humorist, Will Rogers.

"I, myself, had a strange counterreaction. After devoting all my efforts for a year and a half to catching this man, I suddenly didn't want him executed. I still remember the school days, I guess, when Cocol Pro seemed to live only to make other people laugh.

"I even went to my General and pointed out some salient facts. I reminded him of the efforts of the Ambassador from the Argentine and the Ambassador from Peru.

" 'The United States is our Big Brother,' he reminded me. 'Their ambassador is not concerned.'

" 'But there is really no direct evidence that could connect the Pro brothers with the bomb plot. Nothing that would stand up in a court trial.'

" 'I am not interested in a court trial. These men are enemies of the State.'

" 'Your Excellency should give some thought to the great popular feeling, both here and abroad. The reporter from the New York paper is still here. He may write about this in such a way that –'

" 'I will listen to no more. Take these men out and have them shot.'

"I saw Miguel Pro only once after that. It was in the early hours of the dawn, the day he was to be executed. It was not yet daylight, yet thousands of people had gathered outside the prison wall. Many of them were on their knees, praying.

"Father Pro was far more composed than I; one would think he was about to go to the confession booth instead of to his death.

" 'I want you to know,' I stammered, 'that I am sorry, personally, for what I had to do. You had broken the law, and I was sworn to uphold it.'

" 'I was sworn to uphold another law – a higher law. But do not be concerned, my old school friend. I hold no resentment against you. You were only doing your duty, subject to your superiors. . . I, too, am subject to a Superior. Each of us has done his duty in his own way. I have no regrets, and you should have none.'

"I was astonished at his composure. 'Father Pro,' I said, 'Miguel. . . are you not afraid to die? They tell me you make jokes with the guards.'

" 'Not very good ones. God has run out of tricks for his clown.'

"The soldiers had come, now, to lead him outside to the wall.

"He turned to me and said, 'Why should a man be afraid to die when he has served God and his fellow man as best he could?'

Amadeo Marinos finished his narrative with another fit of violent coughing that seemed to wrack his entire body. Cabot noticed for the first time how frail he was. The weight figure, given on his official taxicab I.D. card, was far in excess of his present weight.

"Wouldn't it be better for you if you were in a hospital?" he asked, somewhat warily.

"I cannot give up my taxicab. I will drive it up to the very moment the gates of hell open for me. A man who is dying of cancer of the lungs is going to know some pain. I know it already. But it is not the pain I am afraid of. It is El Diablo, with his pitchfork and his flaming ovens. When a man is idle, and in a hospital, he has much time to think and be afraid. It is different, driving a taxicab. With each new passenger there is a challenge, of sorts. Should I take this man directly down the Paseo de la Reforma to his destination, or can I get away with a discreet detour to run up the meter a bit?. . . You see, Senor, things like this keep the mind from the pain – and the fear. Unlike Father Pro, I











have served no God."

Cabot was overwhelmed with compassion for this man. "Why don't you read his letter?" he asked.

"Ah yes, the letter. . . I had forgotten. Senor, you may find this hard to understand, but I cannot read the letter just now. There is so much pain, and so much fear – up to a certain point. And there the mind rebels, and has to take a moratorium.

"I will read it tonight when I go to bed, or tomorrow morning when I get dressed to come to my taxi stand. I will meet you here tomorrow at this same time and place and show you what Father Pro wrote to me. You will be interested, I know, since your father was so very interested.

Cabot tried to stifle a feeling of deep depression when he returned to his hotel room. Mexico City seemed very shabby, particularly so from the slum area where he had taken lodging. Was it all the fault of the Conquistadores, and the progress they brought? Momentarily he wished that time could reverse itself, and the city would turn back into Tenochtitlan, with its floating gardens and lily ponds.

On an impulse he went to the lobby and tried to place a call to Chichén-Itzá. This would be very difficult, he discovered. Conditions were very primitive, and Ellen Scott's exact whereabouts were unknown.

Of course they couldn't find her, Cabot thought angrily. For Ellen, too, was living back in the past. There was no telephone to Quetzalcoatl's palace, nor was there a radio room in Huitzilopochtli's pyramid.

When he returned to the Plaza the following morning, he found Marinos waiting for him.

The man seemed to be transformed. There was a composure in his face; his eyes seemed no longer restless, as though seeking out secret demons.

"You see, I am on time, Senor Ames," he said, "even though I have had a very busy morning. "I have been to Confession already; made my Act of Contrition. This is the first time I have been in a church to worship since my

boyhood. How fortunate for me that the repressive laws of 1927 are now relaxed."

"Ah yes, Colonel; nothing, I guess, lasts forever."

Marinos opened up the letter he had brought – the letter from Miguel Pro, and read it aloud:

My Dear Colonel:

You have asked me several times if I am not afraid to die. It may be uncomfortable for a brief moment, perhaps, but the feeling passes quickly.

It is very simple, really. You draw a breath, and then you no longer draw another breath. You only suffer this discomfort once.

But when there is fear in your heart, you die every day anew.

I have discovered that the only real death is fear – *this is the ultimate death of the human mind and heart. To conquer fear is to conquer death.*

I have no regrets, and go to my death serenely; may you one day do the same, when your time comes. So you must not have regrets either – today, tomorrow, or ever. For I understand everything, and I have forgiven.

Pax in Christo,
Father Miguel Pro

V

SENORA ALTERA

The journey to Concepcion del Oro had been dry and dusty and tiresome.

Cabot Ames was relieved when he finally debarked the creaky train and made arrangements to rent a jeep for the final lap of his quest for Senora Carlotta Diaz Altera.

It was with considerable difficulty that he learned how to reach the location of the Altera hacienda. They did not understand his Columbia University Spanish, these people. Moreover, they seemed never to have heard of the Alteras.

Cabot was taken aback by this discovery; he thought the Altera family name was synonymous with Concepcion itself.

But they were young, the today people who now ruled the town. They were the new ones, who were born long after the old traditions had died. The Senora herself must be very old.

He at last got the needed information from another old one.

"The Altera hacienda? It is exactly, two miles down this road. But do not expect the Senora to see you. She has seen no one for several years." The Mestizo made a circular motion of his finger against his temple. "The Senora is no longer – how do you say – *'with it'*?"

Cabot wondered, as the jeep churned up the thirsty dust of the road, what disappointments he would find at the hacienda. He had for days been regarding Senora Altera as the crown jewel of his investigations. She was the educated one, the literate one who was to have filled in the flesh, blood and soul of Father Pro, where the others had given him only the skeleton.

Was she senile now? Was it too late to discover her own important chapters from Father Pro's book of life?

The jeep labored to a halt in front of a walled estate. Bougainvilla, which spilled over the wall in huge unkempt masses, had not been pruned in years. Large pieces of stucco had fallen from the wall itself, leaving the ancient brick exposed.

Cabot tugged at a bell by the entrance gate and noted that its dusty leather thong had apparently not been disturbed in many weeks.

After he had rung it several times a weary, middle-aged woman with grey steaks in her dark, stringy hair, came to the gate.

"Senora Altera sees no one," the woman told him. "My orders are to admit no guests."

"But I am a rather special sort of guest," Cabot cajoled. "My name is Cabot Ames; I am the son of a man named Joe Ames who knew the Senora many years ago."

"I have my orders," the woman replied. "I am afraid to disobey."

"Afraid of whom? Surely the Senora would not refuse to see the son of an old friend. Besides, I bring a message to her. A message from Father Miguel Pro."

Before the woman could answer Cabot heard a voice

from one of the upper rooms of the large adobe house inside the courtyard. It was a silver-clear voice, and he was astonished when he looked up to see in the window a serenely ageless face framed in exquisitely-coiffed snow-white hair.

"Someone has come to see me with a message from Father Pro, Nita? That bad boy; why doesn't he come himself! . . . What is your name, young man?"

"I am Cabot Ames, Senora. I am the son of Joe Ames, the newspaper reporter."

"Ah! So you are the young man who has written such fine newspaper stories on Father Pro."

"No, Ma'am; I'm the *son* of the man who wrote the newspaper pieces."

"Show him up at once, Nita."

The woman conducted Cabot across the courtyard and into the house. Once inside, she stopped abruptly.

"You must listen quickly to what I have to say, Senor. . . Senora Altera is a prisoner in her own home. *They* have come and taken over. She received *them* once as guests, and now *they* rule her. *They* have made her write a new will; now *they* will get the hacienda, the vineyards and all her money. I do not care for myself, though I have been with the Senora for many years, ever since I was a girl, and long ago she promised me a lifetime income. But it is the orphans I cry for. The Santa Lucia orphanage was to get her money, after my lifetime annuity. I know it was Senora's wish. But now the orphans will get nothing. *They* will get it all."

Cabot interrupted her feverish outpouring.

"*Who*, Nita? Who are *they*?"

"The Johnsons, sir. Senor and Senora Johnson. They have moved into the house and taken over everything. They threaten, if I talk to anybody, to throw me out, then I will have no home or money. Oh, Senor, these are wicked people. It is our good fortune that they are not here now, or I wouldn't be allowed to even talk to you, and the Senora would not be allowed to see you. They will return

any moment. But please if your father was a friend of hers, try to rescue her. She is very old, Senor. Her mind is keen as a razor on matters of the past. The present she forgets.Be patient with her, and please try to help her. I implore you, Senor."

Cabot patted her arm, wondering just what he was letting himself in for as he followed Nita up the stairs into the sitting room.

Senora Altera reminded Cabot of a delicate, porcelain figurine as he was ushered into her presence. Her gown, like her coiffeur, was exquisite – though in a style of many years past. She seemed to have somehow by-passed time.

"Welcome, Senor Ames," she said. "What news do you bring me of dear Father Pro?"

"I bring you a letter, Senora. Father Pro wrote it many years ago and gave it to my father to deliver, but he died before he could deliver it. . . Please try to understand, try to remember, Senora Altera: Father Pro is dead. I am not Joe Ames; I am Joe's son Cabot."

"Of course, of course. I'm a silly old woman. Sometimes I do not remember the recent things. The past is very clear to me, but today is sometimes a shadow. . . Yes, Father Pro is dead."

"I am bringing you this letter now. It has lain in a trunk for twenty-three years, and its delivery has been delayed through no fault of anyone. Please read it, and pretend, if you like, that it was written only yesterday."

"I do not see very well, Senor Ames. It is just another of the trials of living too many years. Will you read it to me?"

Cabot opened the envelope and read Father Miguel Pro's message to the Senora – over a bridge of twenty-three years:

My Dear Senora Altera:

Dear lady; dear, lovely fairy godmother of my childhood years, second mother, benefactor, counsellor, friend –

What can I say to you now, to thank you for so much

of the beauty that has blessed my life?

My good parents fed and clothed me, but it was you who brought me the magic of books, the wonder and mystery of strange lands. It was you who instilled in me the love of learning.

And – greatest of all your gifts – you brought me to the priesthood. I want you to know that my vocation has brought me great happiness through those brief months that I was privileged to serve.

I am grateful to you, too, for all the things you have done for my beloved Santa Lucia orphans. If my life and death have been of any value, any meaning, I hope that meaning will take permanent form through your continuing interest and support.

Always remember that the greatest truth, the real truth, is that which you feel deepest in your heart.

Your devoted
Cocol

Cabot stared at Senora Altera closely when he finished reading the letter. He thought at first that she had gone to sleep. But she was lost in her reverie.

She finally said, "Thank you, Joe Ames, for bringing me the letter."

"*Cabot* Ames."

Senora flushed, and Cabot was instantly sorry that he had corrected her. "You must forgive my absent-mindedness," she said. "The things in the past were the good things, the things that had meaning. Nothing that happens today is really worth remembering; don't you agree, Senor Ames?"

"Yes . . . Neither events nor *people*. Senora, who are these Johnsons who have come to live with you?"

"Johnsons? . . . Johnsons? . . . Oh yes, of course. They are very kind. They look after me; they take me to Mass every day at Saint Joseph's church."

Nita, who had been lurking unobserved on the far side of the room, now spoke up:

"Senor, they do *not* take her to Mass every day. She only thinks they do. They took her to Mass five years ago when they first moved in, and she thinks that every day is that same day, still. . . Senora Altera has not been out of this house for five years. Her lawyer – the townspeople – have forgotten she ever lived. Sister Elena, from the orphanage, is not allowed inside the gate. She has gone to the Constable, but the Constable doesn't care; he still is living in El General's world."

"You are being very impertinent, Nita," Senora Altera spoke up, sharply.

"But Senora," Cabot intervened, "forgive me for being presumptuous – but have you not told me that you forget many things? I will agree with you that the past is often much pleasanter to remember. But I think it is important now that you should try very hard to concentrate. Going to Mass once, five years ago, is not like going every day."

"You are right, of course. I think about it so often, that sometimes my thoughts make it seem to come true."

"Senora – who are these Johnsons, and how did you meet them? I think Father Pro would like to have known."

"They are from England. Such a lovely couple. They stopped by yesterday asking if they could be taken through the hacienda. They said they were interested in old Spanish houses, and –"

"Yesterday, Senora?"

"Well, perhaps it was a while ago. They are good to me. They will help me with my investments and when I am through with my money, they see that it is distributed to good, charitable causes."

"Senora, forgive me . . . but Father Pro was interested in only one charitable cause – the Santa Lucia orphanage. Let me read you from his letter again: 'I am grateful to you, too, for all the things you have done for my beloved Santa Lucia orphans. If my life and death have been of any value, any meaning, I hope that meaning will take permanent

form through your continuing interest and support.' "

"The Johnsons will see that they receive much help, much more than I could leave them myself. The Johnsons are very clever. They will re-invest my money and make it grow. Not only the orphans, but many other charities will benefit through their kindness."

Cabot took a bold plunge. "Senora... do you really believe this in your heart? Father Pro said 'the greatest truth, the real truth, is that which you feel deepest in your heart." These people – your new friends – have taken over your home and established themselves in it. There is no way you can be sure one peso of your estate will reach the Santa Lucia orphans – or any other charity except the Johnsons themselves. Is it right that they have made you believe they have taken you to Mass every day for five years – when you haven't been outside the house? Is it right that they have turned you against Nita, who has been faithful and loyal to you for many years and deserves some security?"

Senora looked puzzled. "These people – I hardly know them. They only came yesterday."

"Five years ago. They have induced you to make a new will, leaving everything to them. Senora, do you have a lawyer – someone you trust?"

The old woman brightened. "Santiago Aguilla," she said. "He is a dear man; I haven't seen him in weeks."

"*Years*," Nita corrected. "The last time she saw him was four years ago when the Johnsons drove her down to file a new will with his office."

Cabot stood up. "We are going to make a little trip, Senora. We are going back to visit Santiago Aguilla.

"Senora – we must be careful!" Nita had spoken up. "The Johnsons will stop us. They have returned now; I heard the gate close. They will be furious because I have let you in."

"Nonsense," said Senora. "This is my house and I have a right to receive whomever I wish. Senor, just as you say, we will visit Santiago Aguilla. Shall it be – soon?"

"As soon as I can spirit you out of this house, dear

lady."

There were heavy steps on the stair, and the Johnsons soon burst into the room. The woman was a heavy-set blonde, heavily corseted and elaborately made up. Her husband, apparently much older, was tall and thin; his bead-like eyes were distorted behind the heavy lens of his glasses.

"Who is this man," the woman demanded of Nita. "Why have you let him in to disturb and upset Senora? You know your orders."

"I am not in the least disturbed," Senora Altera spoke up. "This man is from the University in Mexico City. He is writing a paper on life in the court of Maximilian and Carlotta. He heard that my mother was one of the ladies-in-waiting."

Nita's jaw dropped in astonishment, but she quickly recovered herself. "I thought it could do no harm, Senora Johnson. My lady is only telling him bits of history that might otherwise be forgotten."

The Johnson woman grunted and started to draw up a chair.

"Please don't feel you must stay," Senora said graciously. "We don't want to bore you. Nita will show the gentleman out when I have told him all I can remember."

Although the woman's husband left, she remained seated in the room.

"I was born in 1867, the year the Emperor was executed," Senora Altera continued carefully. Cabot drew a pad from his inner coat pocket and pretended to take notes.

"My mother, early in her marriage, was a very aristocratic woman who traveled in the highest society. Carlotta her queen, was a beautiful woman, and a proud woman. I was named for her. But also for Maximilian; he never wanted to be Emperor. It was a mad thing, the folly of Napoleon III, actually. Maximilian was born to be an Austrian archduke – never King of Mexico. It was an artificial throne from the very first.

"Maximilian was a quiet man, my mother told me. He loved to spend his time in his greenhouses, and in the library with his books. He understood nothing of international intrigue.

"He was a pawn of the foreign diplomats, that unhappy Maximilian. When the United States recognized Juarez, the French decided to be on the winning side; they withdrew their troops, and the Emperor was left to the mercy of Juarez and his army of mestizos.

"Carlotta was a shrewd one. She had escaped earlier. She had gone to France to plead with Napoleon for help. Poor woman, she went insane in full view of Napoleon and his court. And Maximilian was shot.

"They will go down to the garden now," she said. They will keep watching the window. We will dress Nita up now in one of my dresses, and put my mantilla over her hair and seat her in the window in my place. I did this once before, many years ago. I helped Father Pro escape from El General's men. Hurry; there is no time to lose. . . Senor, you will leave now. You will go quickly. You will make a big show of waving goodbye to the Johnsons in the garden, and you will get in your car and take off, with loud, offensive noises from your motor. But you will only drive a short distance, less than a kilometer, down to where a little cowpath turns in from the main highway. Drive slowly down this road till you come to a gate. Wait for me there. . . . Presto, Senor . . ."

This was a cloak-and-dagger escapade that Cabot hadn't foreseen. Enjoying the conspiracy to the hilt, he followed Senora's instructions, including the elaborate farewell wave to the Johnsons as they sat fanning themselves in the garden. He said a little prayer to Father Pro that they wouldn't immediately leave the garden, once they saw that he had gone, or go up to Senora's sitting room.

Father Pro apparently interceded with Divine Providence. Cabot found the small lich-gate, apparently unused for months, and stopped his engine.

He didn't have to wait long. Senora was spry inspite of

her 83 years and her sometimes-flagging memory.

He helped her into the car and they sped away.

As they traveled toward the town, Cabot said, "This visit has turned out much more exciting than I had anticipated, Senora. I intended chiefly to find out more about Father Pro."

"He was a good man," she mused. "and before that, he was a good child. A lively one, but destined for God's work from the very start. He was cut from different cloth from his sister and his two brothers."

"Please tell me all you can remember about him," Cabot urged.

"While the other children played, Senora Altera recalled, "Miguel Pro seemed to want to linger by my side, absorbing all he could of the tales I told him of my travels, of the great world outside Concepcion – of a world, even, that reached all the way to Madrid.

"I looked upon him as my own child – the son I never had. How proud I was when he won all the prizes in school, and later, when he showed such promise at the novitiate of El Llamo. His talents even came to the attention of the Bishop himself.

" 'The boy is a lively one,' he told me. 'But nonetheless, he is destined for greatness. We are going to see to it that no matter what happens, in this trouble with the government, Miguel Pro will continue with his education.'

"He didn't write often, the years he was abroad. But I knew he was occupied with his studies. I knew that one day he would come back, and we would pick up exactly where we left off.

"That wasn't quite the way it happened, because from the very day Miguel Pro returned to Mexico, an ordained priest, he was a hunted man. His visits with me were always furtive ones.

"I made a very bad mistake once, when he had not been back very long. I sent for him, sending word that I had a project that was urgent.

"When he arrived, I scarcely recognized him. He wore a

peon's tunic, and a huge sombrero hat. A great mustache drooped from his upper lip.

"I told him I thought there was only one thing wrong. " 'You smell too good,' I told him.

" 'I'll try to correct that,' he answered.

" 'Please – not until you leave this house.

"He laughed. Then he said, 'All right, Senora, what is your urgent need?'

"I brought out a beautiful medal that a friend had sent me from Spain. 'I would like to have you bless this, Father?'

"This was the first and only time Father Pro was ever angry with me. He said: 'This is why you sent for me?'

"I explained to him that in the old days it was so simple to have someone come up from the Cathedral. Oh dear! I kept prattling on, till suddenly I was aware that Miguel was staring at me.

"He said, 'Senora, the lives of many people were endangered to bring your message to me. . . The penalty for harboring a priest is a severe one.'

"I was so ashamed of myself for my silly, foolish little whim. But Miguel just smiled, and blessed my medal for me. Only a few moments after that the soldiers came looking for him. I should have died of shame then and there. My folly had brought such danger to this good, good man.

"But I thought to myself, Father Pro is good with the disguises; I will teach him a brand new one.

"So we dressed him up in my clothes, and I passed him off as my deaf and infirm sister.

"Senor Ames, I have seen kings crowned, but this was the greatest moment of my life. I, a silly old woman, was able to outwit El General's finest soldiers. I was able to save Father Pro's life – for a little while. You should write this story up for your paper – ah no, forgive me. I remember now; you are not the same Mr. Ames."

Cabot smiled. "No, Senora. Twenty-three years have suddenly gone by."

She sighed. "Where have they gone to, my friend?"

Senor Santiago Arguilla, an ancient man, sat at an ancient desk backed by huge shelves packed to the ceiling with dusty law books. A thatch of snow-white hair touched his collar, matched by a magnificent white mustache and goatee. His eyes were jet black and brilliant – the sort of eyes that pierced directly into the heart of any situation.

"Senora Altera!" he gasped. "I cannot believe it is you.... How many times I have tried to reach you. I have left messages. I have even come to your gate, but I was always told by your new housekeepers that you would not see me."

Cabot introduced himself. "I was fortunate," he explained," to be able to get into the house when the 'housekeepers,' as you call them, had their backs turned. Senor Arguilla, I am on a rescue mission. Senora Altera has been held a prisoner in her own home. An English couple have forced themselves into her home and gotten control of her person and her money."

"I can speak for myself, Senora Ames," Senora put in somewhat tartly. "I am not a senile old lady. This couple deceived me, with their kindness. They promised to help me with my estate, Senor Ames, here, is the son of an old friend of mine, a newspaper man of long ago who intervened in the case of Father Miguel Pro. Soon after Father Pro was shot, the father of my friend, here, died himself. Senor Ames, Jr. has only now been able to come to me bringing Father Pro's deathbed message to me."

Cabot sighed several breaths of relief after this long speech. The old woman's memory seemed to ebb and flow, flow and then ebb. He was grateful to all the gods of fortune that she was now able to put in an appearance of complete lucidity, so that no question could later be raised of her competence. And one deep, remote recess of his mind toyed with another intriguing thought: could Senora Altera turn it on and off at will? He thought he detected a humorous gleam in her eye.

"I raised certain questions when the Johnsons brought you here, several years ago, to arrange the new will,"

Arguilla said. "You insisted then, my dear Carlotta, that the new will was your wish."

"So I have changed my mind," Senora snapped. "Is it not a woman's privilege?"

"Indeed it is. And I, personally, am the happiest man in all Concepcion. My heart wept for the orphans of Santa Lucia."

"What must one do, then, to invalidate my new will and reinstate the old?"

"It is very simple, Carlotta, my dear. I always held the old will in my safe, hoping, praying that you would some day change your mind. All we need do is burn the new one. I will call in my junior partner to witness the burning and attest that this is your desire, and that you are of sound mind."

Arguilla rummaged through his safe, bellowing, meanwhile, into the adjoining office for one Carlos to put in his appearance immediately.

Arguilla came up from his dusty safe with a dusty-looking document and double-checked it to be sure it was the proper one he sought.

"May I do the honors?" Cabot asked.

"I shall be delighted," replied the old man.

Cabot got out his lighter and ignited one corner. He held onto the will until the curling black sheets of carbon reached to his fingers; then he dropped it into an ash tray and watched the last inch being consumed by the flames. A sudden whiff of air from the electric ceiling fan caught up the black ashes and blew them into oblivion about the room.

Santiago Arguilla was a very able administrator. Cabot noted with relief that he didn't forget even the most minute detail.

First of all, he advised Senora Altera against returning to the house. He would secure a suite for her in the local hotel, and Nita would be summoned to attend her. She would not return to the hacienda until the Johnson's were out, bag and baggage. Meanwhile, a special police officer

would be sent to supervise their leaving and make sure they removed nothing from the hacienda.

He had his assistant draw up a document for their signature stating that they had received payment in full for all services rendered.

"They will surely refuse to sign this paper," Cabot observed.

"On the contrary, they will be very happy to sign it. The alternative will be too unpleasant. It will be very awkward for them if they are called to account for the handling of Senora's income for the past five years. Mexican jails are notoriously uncomfortable. I have a strong feeling that these people will leave by the next train."

"And what then?" Cabot asked. His eyes rested on Senora Altera, who was once again lost in her own secret thoughts.

"It is my hope that Senora will return to the world of her friends, her old friends. Unfortunately, there are all too few of us remaining. But while we last, we will call on our dear lady occasionally, and share a glass of Sherry with her. I will be Conservator of her funds – at no fee, of course, and handle her finances. Meanwhile, Nita will remain her maid and her close companion, as before, and she will be assured a lifetime income. I know of a couple, some very good people from the States who have retired on a small income. They will be happy, for a very small retainer, to make their home in the hacienda, run it and restore it to proper condition. They will make things very comfortable for Senora and she will enjoy her home as she hasn't in many years."

"I believe a new will should be drawn up, just to be sure there will be no complications. And I would suggest that, since Santa Lucia's orphanage is to be the chief beneficiary, Sister Elena be made Administratrix. This will eliminate many complications."

Cabot Ames remained in Concepcion for several days. He was determined to see the drama of Senora Altera's rescue and restoration through to its conclusion.

While Arguilla was working out the legal details, Cabot took Senora and Nita to the smartest dress shop in town and supervised their investment in a complete modern wardrobe.

"I never felt so much like a bride," Senora confessed.

"I will carry you over the threshhold," Cabot countered, laughing.

When they returned at length to the hacienda the Johnsons had decamped, just as Arguilla predicted.

"Welcome to your home again," Cabot said, sweeping her over the threshhold, as he had promised.

"You have been a kind friend. Write good things about me for your paper when you return to New York, Senor Joe Ames."

"*Cabot* Ames!"

He grinned, as he headed the dusty jeep back to town for the last time.

VI

LAURETTE BLANCA

Except for the limousines lined up in front of it, Laurette Blanca's villa was no different from the others that lined this, one of Mexico City's proudest avenues.

The house was set far back from the street, so far that little of it could be seen behind the lush and well-tended trees and shrubbery that grew around it.

Cabot Ames started up the curved driveway in his modest rented car, but, discovering all available inside parking spaces were filled, he backed down, found a spot some distance away and approached the villa on foot.

He was met at the door by a maid in black, with starched white apron, collar and cuffs.

Cabot gave her his name, and asked to speak with Senora Laurette Blanca.

"Please come this way," the very correct maid said. "I

will take you to her secretary; she makes all the arrangements."

"But I do not wish to speak with anyone else. I must see only Senora Blanca."

The maid was properly apologetic. "You must understand, Senor, that Senora Blanca makes no personal appointments. She is a very important and well known person, and naturally all wish a visit only with her. She is flattered, but she cannot break her rule for anyone. . . But her girls are very beautiful, Sênor. There is Kathy, a stunning Americano who used to be in movies. Renee and Celeste are both from the most exclusive houses in Paris. Carmella is ex-mistress of an important man in Europe."

"Young lady, my audience with Senora Blanca is not of a – personal nature. It is strictly business . . . Or perhaps I should re-state this, on second thought. My audience with Senora Blanca would not be of a *business* nature. It is strictly *personal*."

"Senor, I do not understand. You Americanos talk in jokes."

"Please tell the Senora that Cabot Ames, son of the American reporter Joe Ames, is here to deliver a letter Father Miguel Pro wrote her from his prison cell the night before he was executed. Tell her I am twenty-three years late. I'm sure she will see me."

In just a few brief moments Cabot was ushered into Senora Blanca's private quarters.

Cabot's jaw dropped when he came face to face with the woman. He had to pause a moment before speaking to recover his aplomb; otherwise, he feared, he would stammer like a schoolboy.

A "Madam" was supposed to be fat and blowsy and crude and dissipated. Cabot had never seen one, in actual fact. His biological life, ever since puberty, had always been so well adjusted that he never needed to seek commercial love. Nevertheless, he had a very vivid preconceived idea of what a Madam would be like, and this one, who smiled at him from her chair drawn up to an antique spinet desk, did

not fit into the mold.

For one thing, he thought she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his entire life.

"Please be seated, Senor," she said in a softly modulated voice. "I will be delighted to talk with you about Father Pro. Just allow me a few more seconds. It is such a trial, keeping accounts and writing checks. No female should be a business woman."

While Cabot waited he had an opportunity to study the woman. She appeared to be about thirty, but he knew she had to be at least forty – probably more. Her hair was dark black. She wore a black velvet hostess gown with high neck and long sleeves, concealing everything but her exquisite slenderness. Her only ornament was a string of matched pearls.

She looked aristocratic in a way that genuine aristocrats seldom do.

A second maid – different from the one who ushered him in – glided in silently and left a tray of assorted liquors, a silver ice bucket and glasses on the coffee table.

Simultaneously, Senora Blanca rose from her desk and sat down in the chair opposite Cabot.

"I like to mix my own drinks for my friends," she said. "No one else can make a Martini properly dry. What may I fix for you, Senor?"

"You just sold me on a Martini."

Senora mixed the drinks and Cabot, taking one experimental sip, confirmed her expertise.

"Now!" she said. "You say you have a message to me from Father Pro?"

Briefly, Cabot went into his routine explanation of the reason for the twenty-three year delay, and handed her the envelope.

He watched her carefully as she unsealed the letter and read it. Not so much as a flicker marred the calm repose of her classic features.

When she had finished, she folded the letter carefully, replaced it in its envelope and said to Cabot very simply,

"Thank you, Senor."

There was an awkward pause. She made no move to share the contents of the letter with Cabot, as the others had done. He was acutely disappointed. Her manner told him plainly that the interview was at an end, but he decided to make a bold plunge.

"The Martini was excellent," he hinted, with ever-so-slight emphasis on the word "was."

Senora smiled and without a word poured him another drink.

"You would like to hear about Father Pro?" she asked, as though reading his mind. Very well. I will tell you about him. I have plenty of time. I have a great deal of time on my hands, as a matter of fact. This establishment of mine is what you Americans call 'big business'. It would run itself without any interruption if I should disappear for a month."

She poured another drink for herself, and then began her tale:

"I had known Father Pro ever since I was twenty-two. Many times I wished I had known him earlier. I lived such a long life in those twenty-two years before I knew him. I crowded perhaps fifty years into my girlhood.

"I was born in Monterrey and brought up, in the beginning, like any proper upper-middle-class Mexican girl. By the time I was eleven I was aware that I had a face and a body that brought me certain advantages. When I was fifteen I wanted to study drama to prepare myself to go on the stage. My parents forbid it, so I ran away.

"The story, thus far, has a very familiar ring, doesn't it, Senor? It becomes even more banal as we go along. I made my way to Mexico City and haunted the film studios till I found occasional work as an extra. I wrote my parents long letters about my brilliant career. I didn't tell them that I only appeared in the mob scenes, and more often than not my face wouldn't even be recognized.

"At last I got a film contract, but it wasn't a very

flattering kind of a contract. The chief thing I was expected to do might have fitted me very well for the career I eventually adopted – except that I did not react properly."

"As a part-time 'party girl' I was expected to entertain prominent visiting film executives. You may not believe it, Senor, but I was very naive in those days. I remained a genuine virgin – until I met Ricardo.

"He was the son of a very important film executive who had been transferred from Spain to Mexico City. The man was married to a very aristocratic Spanish lady and Ricardo was their only son; there were several daughters.

"My studio has blundered, for Ricardo's father, Senor Estaban was not interested in pretty studio girls. He and his Senora commented on how young I appeared, and invited me to stay for tea.

"Ricardo – hardly any older than I – was playing ping-pong with his sisters; they offered to show me how to play the game.

"That is how I met Ricardo.

"We became inseparable. No one, I believed, had ever been so completely in love. His parents were amused at first, but when they discovered how serious we were, they made it their business to inquire into my background.

"When they found out that I was a starlet and a 'party girl' they straightway arranged to send Ricardo back to Spain to school.

"He told me he did not intend to go back to school; he would get a job when he reached Madrid and send for me just as soon as he had saved enough money. . . Sound familiar, Senor?

"It will sound even more familiar when I tell you that not long after he left I found out that I was pregnant – and that I never heard one single, solitary word from Ricardo again.

"When I first knew that I was pregnant I was divinely happy. I knew I would bear a son, and he would look like my Ricardo, with his blond, wavy hair and blue eyes that are found so often among the Andalusians. My Ricardo –

my husband-to-be – would be so proud.

"When I didn't hear from him I tried to write; but how could I write, with no address? Spain is a big country, and Madrid is a big city. I went to his parents' home to plead with them. By this time there was a pronounced roundness to my belly, which, I suppose, they thought would mean a lot of trouble for them. They told me that Ricardo was dead, that he had been killed in an auto racing mishap.

"I wasn't even going to tell them about the baby. What did it matter, now? But they asked me about it. When I told them it was Ricardo's, they said how could they be very sure, what with my reputation, and everything? However, they offered to pay my expenses in a convent nursing home and find an adoptive home for my baby. A 'suitable home,' they said, where it would be brought up in affluence.

"This is all so tiresome, Senor. What could I do? I couldn't go home to my parents. At that time I was so young, so very naive. I was grateful to them and accepted their offer.

"I had a daughter. She didn't have the fair skin and blue eyes of her father; she had my darkness. She was twenty-five years old on the 15th of this month – and I have never seen her!

"For years I watched the society pages. I even kept a scrapbook which I filled with pictures of young society girls who could have been my daughter. As I grew older, I became more and more convinced that the Estabans had kept control over Ricardo's child and her future in some way or other. Every time a new debutante was presented to society, I searched her picture for signs of a family resemblance. There were several whom you might call my 'prime suspects.' I kept track of their lives through the newspapers – their coming-out parties, their marriages, the babies that were born to them. I own several sets of possible grandchildren, Senor!

"In the beginning, I was so naive that I thought I could get my daughter back. I worked again as an extra just long

enough to save money for a business course. I got a job – a good job. But when I went to the convent, they told me they were unable to give me any information. I never signed away my baby; fate just took her away from me. Today the rights of unwed mothers are more carefully guarded. . . But this was twenty-five years ago.

"I even went back to the Estaban's and pleaded with them to help me find my baby and win her back. They shut the door in my face.

"Then I became a prostitute.

"I believe I was a very good prostitute, because I never had any trouble making money. I made lots of money, right from the start.

"I worked out of a house at first, and then I went in business for myself.

"I was still at the house when I met Father Pro for the first time. It was in 1926. He had just returned to Mexico after being ordained somewhere in Europe. He walked into Mexico like a fly walking into the net of a spider. Those were very bad days for the Church. I personally saw a Cardinal shot to death right on the steps of the Cathedral.

"One of the girls met Father Pro purely by accident, and she thought it would be a great sport to invite him to come to the House and hear our confessions.

"I don't believe he was as naive as she thought. With a perfectly straight face he heard our confessions, one by one, and gave us all penance and absolution.

"A week or so later the girls called him back. He was young, and very, very handsome and full of high spirits, and I can assure you, he would have a strong physical attraction for any woman.

"He said to us, 'I cannot give you absolution because you are continuing to sin. Our Lord never planned a continuous round of sinning and repentance. However, I will be your friend and help you in any way I can. I have discovered that it is very dangerous to be a priest in Mexico,' he went on. 'But nevertheless, I will come when any of you are in trouble or in need.'

"It turned out that the girls who, in the beginning, had

only intended to mock him, now found in him their only link to decency and honor. If a girl became sick, he saw that she received care. If she was unhappy and wanted to change her way of living, he gave her not only good counsel, but practical help in the form of funds to start a new life. If she was pregnant, he saw her through her confinement, saw to it that she didn't make the mistake that I had made – giving up her child before she had time to think it over with a clear mind. If the final decision was to give the child up, he placed it in the orphanage he sponsored and had the nuns there look after it until a good home could be found.

"He was a good friend to us, Senor; none of us could ever forget what he did for us. He didn't approve of our way of life, but neither did he forsake us. He said we were all God's children, and God wouldn't forget even the smallest sparrow.

"Sometimes I thought he was almost too good. I think that was the frame of mind I was in in the late summer of 1927. My life seemed completely hopeless; there seemed to be nothing in my future.

"Fate gave me a chance to save Father Pro's life then, although it turned out to be futile. The soldiers finally caught up with him and shot him.

"I was in business for myself by this time, and had my own quarters. I had become very well known and had lots of clients from the highest society as well as from the government, the army.

"Early one evening as I was working my territory, I felt someone grasp my arm and start to weave with me drunkenly in the direction of my apartment. I turned on him angrily and discovered it was Father Pro.

" 'You must hide me, Laurette,' he gasped, 'The soldiers are after me.'

"I took his arm and weaved with him down the street. By the time the soldiers got close enough to recognize me, we were close to my door.

" 'A little love, Senor?' I said in a loud voice. 'Does my

Fernando think he is up to my skill this evening?'

" 'Keep acting, Laurette,' he whispered.

"I laughed loudly and threw my arm around his shoulder, drawing him toward the building.

"Inside, we waited breathlessly, almost sure the soldiers would break down the door.

"He was sure they had recognized him, but then would they ever believe that a priest, a man of God, would consort with a prostitute?

"I peeped at last through the drawn curtain and saw that they were walking away.

"Suddenly I was filled with great anger – anger at the law, the government, the police, even at Father Pro for risking his life. What had his God ever done for him? What pleasures had life brought to him? Could he really be the saint he appeared to be? Was it possible that such a young, virile man at the height of his sexual powers could really be immune to women?

"I don't know what came over me. I must have been tempted by Satan himself. At that moment, I really desired Father Pro, the way I hadn't desired a man for a long, long time.

"I assumed my most provocative attitude. 'Well, aren't you going to preach to me. Doesn't it make you uncomfortable being here? I take money from men who go to bed with me – any time of the day or night. Any time. . .Any man. Don't you feel some need for me?'

" 'I needed you in the worst way today, Laurette,' he answered, quietly. 'You saved my life.'

"I leaned back the bed and folded my arms behind my neck so that my breasts were thrust out.

" 'Wouldn't you like to try me, priest?' I taunted. 'I'm very good, you know.'

"I watched his eyes as they slid over my body – and then returned to my face.

" 'I'm sure that you must be all that you say. But thank you, no. If I had any money I would give you some, but – '

"I was suddenly filled with fury at his resistance.

Superficially I was angry because no man had ever rejected me before. But deeper than that I was angry because I knew he was throwing away his life. I knew the police would catch him sooner or later and he would be shot. . .This wonderful, kind man, vibrant with life, would be shot.

" 'Hypocrite!' I hissed at him. 'They've chased you and your kind all out of Mexico. Why don't you stay out? No one wants you here.'

" 'No one? But even you must want me. You just invited me into your bed.'

" 'I felt the tears rising in my eyes. But suddenly there came a loud rap at the door.

"Father Pro and I were frozen to the spot.

" 'Quickly,' I gasped when I had recovered myself. 'You must hide.'

"I pushed him behind a flimsy screen and covered him with one of my voluminous chiffon negligees.

"The rapping at the door was louder, more insistent.

"I opened the door and my heart stopped when I found two men standing there. One of them was a policeman. The other was not in uniform. Possibly a plainsclothes man, I thought.

" 'Laurette, my girl, are you up to a couple of strong bulls this evening? If not – you'd better be.'

" 'You've interrupted my siesta,' I said, trying to shut the door.

"But he had his foot over the threshhold. 'Since when are you so choosy, my fine Senorita? We have plenty of money.'

" 'I make my appointments at my own convenience,' I snapped. 'Besides, I have no waiting room for your friend.'

"They both laughed, and I realized they had been drinking heavily.

" 'Neither of us is impatient, my dear Duchess. Each will be content to watch while the other takes his turn.'

" 'Pigs,' I spat at them. 'I will report you to your superiors. You have been drinking – and you are in uniform.'

" 'Excuse me, Duchess,' said the one in uniform, 'I really came to arrest *you*. (My heart stopped.) 'You are constantly breaking regulations. However, I can be lenient, if you will in turn be good to me and my friend.'

" 'She needn't even be good to us,' the man in civilian clothes said. 'Sometimes they're better when they're a bit spunky – you know, plenty of fight in them.'

"Both men were in the room now, and were pawing at my clothes. I was overcome with horror and shame.

"When both men had finished with me that evening, I wished that I was dead. I was crying hysterically when I felt Father Pro's hand upon my head.

" 'Do not cry, child,' he was saying. 'What happened was not your fault.'

" 'I am so ashamed,' I cried. 'You see now what I do for money. You have heard the sounds of lust.'

" 'No, my child. I have heard the sounds of the act that creates life. Sometimes this act is diverted from its original holy intent. But human error need be only temporal; forgiveness is eternal.'

" 'Father,' I said, 'what can I ever hope for, after living this kind of life?'

"He smiled – and his smile was full of wisdom. 'Perhaps this wretched life will make your future seem all the more bright,' he said. 'It is a matter of contrast. The butterfly, looking back on how dreary it was to be a caterpillar, must feel all the more beautiful.'

" 'Thank you, Father. And pray for me.'

" 'I'll pray for you, Laurette,' he said, 'if you will pray for me.'

"That was the last time I ever saw him alive. The closest I came to him till I marched in his funeral procession.

"They arrested him on a completely framed-up charge. A young firebrand, a young engineer named Luiz Segovia Vilchis, was seen getting out of an old white Essex car. Moments later he was seen throwing a bomb in the path of El General's automobile. El General was on his way to the bullfights with his wife. He didn't go many places with his

wife, but this was a state occasion, the opening of the season.

"Josina told me what happened afterwards. She saw the whole thing because she was riding in the limousine behind El General.

"Josina occasionally went back to the House that had once been her home, just as I often did. The girls there were the only real friends we had. She was one of the girls who, as we said, had really made good. She had visited El General once as a client, and he had been so pleased with her that he installed her as his mistress in a beautiful villa at Cuernavaca.

"I think she really hated him. 'What a pity that poor bastard was such a bad shot,' she said. 'My General only got his fine clothes mussed up a bit. All his medals and ribbons were only scorched. As for *her* – the blast blew her wig completely off. The whole world knows now that she is grey – and getting bald. And El General – the whole world knows, now, that he is *yellow*.'

Senora Blanca filled Cabot's martini glass again.

"I can tell you very little more of Father Pro," she continued. "He was caught and shot, just as we knew he would be, eventually. El General didn't need any 'incident' to have Father Pro shot. Plenty of priests had been shot with no incident at all. But he knew Father Pro's immense popularity with the people, and even *he* was a little squeamish about murdering him in cold blood. So he connected the white Essex with the Pro brothers and tried to make it look as though they had engineered the plot.

"He ordered his police to have photographs taken of Father Pro as he faced the firing squad. They photographed him in his last moments praying for his enemies; they photographed his body as it fell, and they photographed his corpse, hideous from the bullets that had torn through him. The photographs were sent to the press; they were intended to show the world how firmly the State dealt with its enemies. But the public reaction was so angry that within

just two weeks they were all recalled, and it became a penal offense for anyone to possess copies.

"All this happened a long time ago, and things are different in Mexico now, Senor.

"I have done very well for myself, as you can see. It would be nice if I could tell you that I gave up my evil ways, then and there. But life is never that simple. I was accumulating more and more money and putting it into the band. 'In a little while,' I kept telling myself. 'I will have a better life. But I must be secure. When I finally do quit, I must be in a financial position far beyond temptation.' But the more money one makes, the more one needs to consider oneself secure. And in time, nothing seems to matter much. One just goes along from day to day, the easy way.

"But I will have to tell you, Senor, that this letter you have brought me from Father Pro has jolted me in a very strange way."

"Do you care to tell me about it?" Cabot asked, taking a long chance. "My father was a crack newspaper reporter, you know, and maybe I have inherited some of his curiosity about human nature. But it is not all curiosity, Senora. I will be kind to myself and call it 'interest.' "

She looked at him long and steadily and lit a cigarette.

"I will read the letter to you, Senor," she said, after long moments had passed.

She opened up the letter and read it from beginning to end. Her manner was cool and detached, as though she was reading about other people, who bore no relationship to her own reality:

My Dear Laurette:

It may seem strange to you that one of these, my last letters, should be directed to you. I do not speak to you, now, or even think of you in my final hours as a "stray lamb." After all, it is not within the province of a priest to pass judgment.

I speak to you now as a dear friend.

You have been dearer to me than you ever knew – not alone because you saved my life, but because I have an intuitive awareness that if our situations had been different, we might have traveled the same path.

I wish there might be some way I could bequeath you happiness. It is a great, impossible wish for me to make, tonight, when tomorrow I will be shot.

But perhaps it is not so impossible. A miracle could happen to you – either now or in the years far ahead – that will set you free, and transform the caterpillar into a beautiful, shimmering butterfly.

Miguel Pro

She folded the letter carefully.

"Senor, something very strange has happened to me. I have dabbled a bit in the occult. You may find it hard to believe, but a woman in my position has a great deal of spare time on her hands. I have people working for me who handle the details of my business. Sometimes things happen for no apparent reason and all of life seems to be more or less haphazard. . . At other times it almost seems as though there is a master plan of some sort.

"But I will have to go back into time and explain how things were."

Cabot listened thoughtfully as she went on with her tale.

"When Father Pro died, I had the terrible, lost feeling of someone cast adrift.

"There had been only two men who figured importantly in my life, and now both of them were dead.

"You are raising your eyebrows, Senor, but never once, throughout all those years, did I allow myself to doubt that Ricardo Estaban was dead.

"This was a luxury I had to indulge myself. If I had permitted myself to believe that I had been abandoned, this, plus all the degradation of my life that came later, would have been more than I could have withstood.

"I became very adept at rationalizing things. By giving myself to many men, I felt in some perverse way that I was being true to Ricardo's memory. If I had given myself to just one man, in honest love and marriage, *that* would have been the disloyalty. (It is very difficult for men to understand these things. There is much in a woman's mode of thinking that is obscure to a man.)

"As I grew older I became more and more discriminating in my clientele. I came to know many of the most influential men, both in Mexico and in the States. I read a great deal, so I could converse with them intelligently. They enjoyed my company and often sought my advice in matters that were really, very important.

"In return they gave me valuable advice. I learned about investments and acquired a knack of pyramiding my money. One man in particular, a very important man on Wall Street, found it a hugely diverting game to make me a rich woman.

"All these men, you must understand, never regarded me as anything but an amusing toy. And I never regarded them as anything but objects of secret contempt.

"As time went by I lost track of the Estaban family. The parents, I heard, had gone back to Spain. The daughters had married and scattered. Memory was the only link I had with Ricardo Estaban.

Senora Blanca got up, walked over to her window which commanded a breathtaking view of the lights of the city. She stared at the twinkling lights for a long time before she returned to her chair and resumed her story:

"*Then one day he came back.*

"You are surprised, Senor Ames. You, a son of a newspaper man, should know that only the unexpected is to be expected.

"Yes, Ricardo Estaban came back to Mexico City. Came back to my House. He didn't know it was my house, of course. Senora Blanca was a name I had made up much

much later. . . He didn't know it was *my* house – he only knew it was a *House.*

"In operating a business such as this one has to make use of certain signals. This is a very sophisticated establishment. We permit minor perversions; our girls are trained to be very tolerant and broad-minded. We even permit major perversions, providing that they hurt no one.

"But we cannot allow a disturbance to take place.

"If a client refuses to pay, we simply escort him to the door and suggest that he never return. If he is drunk and we are acquainted with him and know he is a gentleman, we escort him to a small room we maintain for the purpose and allow him to quietly sleep it off.

"If he is rude to our girls, we return his money and suggest that he leave.

"Sometimes – not very often – a situation arises when a client is drunk and disorderly, rude to our girls and will not pay. I have a corps of butlers who have certain collateral duties, one of them being to induce such persons to leave before they find themselves in genuine trouble.

"We never employ force here – just the *appearance* of force. Force can often lead to assault, and even murder, and such a scandal I can do without. But when the situation becomes really troublesome, then and then only am I summoned. There is an inter-com outlet in my quarters which is always open. When someone shouts into it: '*Mayo Dia*' I know at once this means trouble. Something like the 'Hey Rube' of your country's circus, Senor.

"What I do then is make a determination whether the situation can be dealt with, or whether we should call the police. Calling the police is a very unattractive alternative. I have a very good relationship with the police force. They are my friends and I am theirs. However, I know enough about politics to know that one can remain a friend only when one is not troublesome.

"I pride myself on being a very effective diplomat. Only on rare occasions, in all the years I have kept an establishment of this sort, have I ever had to resort to

calling the police.

"This time, though, as I hurried down the hall hearing the commotion, I sensed that the problem would be a grave one.

"I could hear the shouting – a man screaming in a high, almost falsetto voice which was drowning out the sobs of one of my girls.

"The man who was doing all the shouting was very drunk, very abusive.

"It was Ricardo Estaban.

"The years had been brutual to him – the years, or the life he had led. His blue eyes were faded and he had difficulty focusing with them. His blond hair – now streaked with a nondescript pepper-and-salt gray – receded high on his forehead and every sign of dissolute living was etched on his flushed face.

"He was wearing a wrinkled, dirty white linen suit; the open jacket fell away to reveal a soft, bloated and flaccid belly. His tie was loosened and some nauseous substance was still moist on it. It could have been spilled food, or it could have been vomit.

" 'She tried to steal my wallet, the dirty whore,' he whined.

" 'It isn't true,' sobbed Allegra, one of my younger and less experienced girls.

"I gave the signal to Ferdinand and Alexis, two of my guards. Alexis pinioned the man's hands behind his back while Ferdinand patted his coat and pants pockets. We knew what to expect, as we had been through this same sordid procedure many times before. Ferdinand found the wallet in his pants pocket and handed it to me.

" 'Your wallet, I believe, Senor Estaban,' I said holding it out to him.

"He gaped at me in astonishment. 'I haven't used that name in years,' he muttered.

" 'Forgive my informality, Ricardo. I knew you by no other surname.'

"In that moment he recognized me. Even as he

stammered my name, I was giving crisp orders to Alexis and Ferdinand. 'Give this gentleman all the facilities of our Suite Sixteen.'

"This meant, 'Give him a Mickey Finn, put him to bed, clean up his clothes. When he awakens, have him showered and shaved and then bring him to me.'

"Senor Ames, you will never know what a kaleidoscope of thoughts went through my mind while I waited throughout the hours for Ricardo Estaban to sober up.

"This would be my moment of triumph – but how would I savor it? There was a temptation, of course, to destroy him with the fury of my contempt, but I abandoned this course without a second thought. The years had dealt unpleasantly with the lover of my girlhood. . . but then, let us face it, the years had dealt unpleasantly with me, also. Was I not the Madame of the most notorious whorehouse in all Mexico City? . . . So few of us live up to our early dreams of ourselves.

"I think what was foremost in my mind, throughout all those hours of waiting, was that Ricardo Estaban might be the key to restore my daughter to me. Also, I thought, I must see what he is like when he is not sodden with drink. I simply could not accept the thought that I had thrown my life away for the creature that I had seen that night.

"I had to wait throughout most of the next day; it was twilight when Alexis Ferdinand brought him to me, cleaned up and sober, but still truculent.

" 'So you're the Madame,' he said in a voice that was almost a sneer. 'You've come a long way since the old days, Laurette.' His eyes took in the luxury of my apartment and then dwelt on me. I was wearing my most expensive gown and my best jewelry.

" 'There would not be Madames such as I, Ricardo, if there were not customers such as you,' I answered quietly.

" 'No need to get hoity-toity,' he said. 'We've got a lot of catching up to do. It looks as though you've done all right by yourself.'

"I nodded. 'In the past year, after all expenses, bribes

and other operating costs were deducted, I was able to deposit enough to credit me with $50,000 U.S. dollars in a New York bank.'

"I think I was baiting him. I recognized the acquisitive gleam in his eye. Many men have sought to court me, Senor Ames. I am a walking, breathing gold mine.

"Ricardo was no different from the rest – except that he was worse. He said, 'I could be a big help to you here, Baby. A place like this really needs a man to handle the rough stuff. We were pretty hot for each other once, Baby, how about rekindling the bonfire?'

"This was where I burst my bombshell. 'Did you know, Ricardo,' I said – trying to keep my voice calm – 'that out of that little bonfire, a child was born?'

"His astonishment was a complete give-away. Ricardo was not enough of an actor to feign amazement. I knew then and there that his parents had never told him.

" 'We had a daughter,' I told him. '*I* had a daughter.'

" 'Well how about that! Where is she? How soon can she meet her old man?. . . Not here in this house, I hope?' He stared at me in genuine concern.

" 'No, Ricardo,' I said. 'I have not led my daughter into a life of prostitution. As a matter of fact, I have not led my daughter anywhere. To this day, I don't know where she is. One hour after she was born I said good-bye to her.'

Cabot Ames was startled when the woman brought down both fists forcibly on the arms of her chair.

"Senor Ames," she said, "he just shrugged! Simply shrugged his shoulders! We had had this baby between us. I threw my life away. . .He shrugged!"

The Senora's anger was suddenly spent. With a wry smile she went on with her narrative:

"I finally managed to say: 'I'm fascinated by your nonchalance.'

" 'Well,' he answered, 'I probably have dozens of offspring scattered around here and there – "

" 'Yes. . .you probably do, Ricardo.'

" 'You don't have to get nasty about it,' he said. 'After all, nobody ever told me about the child.'

"Now was the time, I knew, to plunge right in and play all my trump cards.

" 'Ricardo,' I said, 'I want to find my baby and I'm willing to pay well for information that will lead me to her.'

" 'My God, Laurette; that was twenty-five years ago. She isn't a baby any more. She's a grown woman. She's probably married, with babies of her own.'

" 'Ricardo,' I plunged on, 'I'm willing to pay most liberally.'

" 'You don't have to bribe me, Laurette.' he said. 'If I knew where she was, I'd tell you.'

"I knew he felt he could well afford to be sanctimonious. So I took double pleasure in pricking this sanctimoniousness with my next barb:

" 'I have good reason to believe that your parents know where she is. Since you are so kind, maybe you can find out from them where she was placed for adoption.' I waited just long enough to watch him fidget. Then I added: 'Of course, I'll be willing to pay very well for the information.'

"This last, of course, changed Ricardo's attitude, as I knew it would.

" 'I have certain information on my father which my mother would be glad to have,' he mused. 'And I also have information on my mother that my father could use. A little discreet persuasion, and I could perhaps wrest this secret from them.'

"Ricardo, like me, was also playing for large stakes. The largest. Why settle for a bribe, however generous, when he might gain control of the most prosperous whorehouse in all Mexico City?

" 'If I do,' he said slowly, 'where do we go from there, Senor Blanca?. . . *Madame* Blanca?. . .Our little family would be reunited, wouldn't it? It would be inconvenient for me to marry you because, unfortunately, I already have a wife in Tenarife. But no matter. We could run this place

together, and meanwhile set up a remote little apartment on the other side of town where our daughter – and possibly our grandchildren – could visit us on weekends. You're not getting any younger, Laurette, and neither am I. We might patch something up out of this.'

" 'I'll think it over,' I told him. 'Come back in a week.' "

Laurette Blanca suddenly got up and paced back and forth across the floor. Cabot watched her silently, waiting for her to proffer whatever information she wished, in her own time.

She went to the window and gazed out over the city. When she spoke, it seemed as though she was speaking to herself, unaware of Cabot's presence in the room:

"What I would be buying," she finally said, "would be my daughter's life. . . Father Pro, in his letter, gave me back my own life."

She returned to her chair and smiled at Cabot. "I am going to let my daughter go," she said. "I will let her keep whatever dreams she may have of her mother and father. I will not sentence her to a whore mother and an evil, ugly father.

"Tomorrow I will burn all the scrapbooks. My daughter is gone forever. All she will ever have of me now is my prayers for her happiness.

"And tomorrow, *my* life begins. The caterpillar will become the 'beautiful, shimmering butterfly,' Senor. I will close down this place, sell the property, give a farewell bonus to each of my girls to help them start anew and donate the rest to Father Pro's orphans. After that – who knows what?"

"Bravo!" said Cabot. "Bravo and ole and cheers! What are you going to tell Estaban?"

Senora sat down at her spinet desk, scratched off a few lines with her long, fluttery feather quill, then handed the paper to Cabot:

"*I am going to Spain, Ricardo. I do not intend to go*

back to school but will get a job when I reach Madrid and send for you just as soon as I've saved up enough money."

VII

RAMON ORTEGO

Jolting painfully eastward on the rickety train to Veracruz, Cabot found himself regretting the restoration of his common sense.

Momentarily, while he was standing at the ticket agency to buy his ticket to Veracruz, he had an impulse to buy instead a plane ticket that would carry him only a few hundred miles farther, across the Gulf of Campeche and to Merida. From there it would be less than a day's trip by bus to Chichén Itzá – and Ellen.

He was bursting with things to say to Ellen, things he had learned of the far-reaching power of a humble little priest who had died nearly a quarter of a century before.

Ellen, he remembered in the nick of time, would not care. She was more interested in the Feathered Serpents of the Toltecs.

The train was hot and dusty and made numerous whistle stops along the way. He watched the women trudging drearily across the station platforms wearing the same voluminous skirts and black shawls they had been wearing for centuries. They were invariably followed by urchins which should have been their grandchildren, their great-grandchildren, judging from the weatherbeaten hopelessness in their faces. But Cabot knew these children were of the first generation. He wondered, idly, why the Mexican women seemed to age with such cruel rapidity.

He thought of Ellen, slender and cool and exquisite – and regally detached. He tried to picture her with babies. The only such image he could conjure was of Ellen in a wheat field, her hair golden in the sunshine and tossed by the wind as it flowed over her shoulders. There would be a joyous smile on her tanned face; the same smile would glow from the sunny-haired children who played about her skirts.

It was impossible to visualize Ellen alongside hardship. Ellen trudging along a railway platform in a black shawl, followed by tatterdemalion waifs... Ellen in a Brooklyn flat.

He could not even see her at his side on this hot, dusty train, headed for a dreary destination -- the Veracruz jail. The only context in which he could fit an image of Ellen was one of happy, carefree luxury.

The summer would be over soon. They would meet again in Mexico City and return to New York together. Ellen didn't know that he could still get his degree next June without the summer field trip credits. She didn't know because he hadn't told her. For some perverse reason he let her believe that he was sacrificing his diploma – and the instructor job her father could line up for him – purely on an irrational whim that sent him on the trail of a long-gone Father Pro.

His reasoning, he told himself, was completely fallacious. He wanted her to choose to be at his side, no matter how perverse his mission. He wanted her to bend her will to his,

even though there was no valid reason for her to make this sacrifice. He wanted her to say: "Lo, Master, I will shave my head for you" so that he could then beneficently tell her: "No need, my lovely slave, I have ample corn silk."

Scowling, he tried to put such disturbing thoughts out of his mind.

He stared at the sealed envelope directed, in Father Pro's flowing hand, to the man in the Veracruz jailhouse. Only the letter was not directed to a man in the Veracruz jailhouse – but to the eight-year-old boy that that man had once been.

Ramon Sanchez Ortego, Anarchist, seditionist, and finally murderer.

His political crimes, Cabot noted wryly, were not the ones that had ultimately caught up with him. His murder was a crime of passion. A sordid barroom brawl.

Ramon Sanchez Ortego. He had been eight years old when Amadeo Marinos had forced him to reveal the hiding place of Father Pro. He would be thirty-one, today.

What could Father Pro, sentenced to death, write to a child responsible for his capture, that would have any meaning to a man, also facing execution?

Cabot's depression heightened when he reached Veracruz, registered at a shabby hotel and checked out, from a cab driver, visiting regulations at the jail.

With a discreet "donation," he was informed, anyone could see any of the prisoners at any time.

Cabot therefore presented himself at the grim prison gate, and some moments later was flashing a U.S. five-dollar bill before the jail captain.

"May I inquire the nature of your visit?" the official asked him unctuously as he pocketed the bill.

Patiently, Cabot repeated the story, the tale he had told so many times before.

"Father Pro, eh? . . . Father Pro was an enemy of the State. We don't encourage our prisoners to have any contact with persons of this sort."

Patiently, Cabot drew another five-spot from his wallet and passed it across the table. "Forgive me, my Captain, but do you people attempt to mold the character of a man who is imprisoned on a murder charge?"

"Dios, no, Senor. (Thank you for your contribution to our police welfare fund.) . . . This particular prisoner has presented us with a problem. The stupid ones we like; they give us no problems. But this man is a genius. He writes pamphlets which inflame the people. Bombs and arson we can deal with – but ideas we do not like. For many months we have been hoping to catch him with the goods, as you say in the States. What poetic injustice that he should finally fall into our clutches for a messy, barroom murder. Ramon Ortego should have done better than that."

Cabot smiled. "Will you take me to him, Captain?"

"Forgive me, Senor, but we must ask to see the letter this priest, this communist agitator, has written to him. Such letters often incite unruly prisoners to riot.

"The priest has been dead twenty-three years." Cabot protested. "The letter was written not to an unruly prisoner, but to an eight-year-old boy."

"Nevertheless, we must look at it. The whole thing might be a trick. Hidden meanings could be concealed within the sentences."

He reached out his hand for the letter.

Cabot thought of his wallet, and the rapidly dwindling supply of folding money. "Unfortunately," he said, "I have nothing more to give to the Police Welfare Fund. When you have satisfied yourself that the letter is innocuous, may I then take it to the prisoner?"

"Ah, Senor, I detect a note of sarcasm in your voice. I can only repeat that we must take special pains with a prisoner of this sort. Only last week an audacious attempt was made to smuggle a gun to him. His wife –"

Cabot raised his eyebrows.

"Yes," the captain went on. "We have certain customs in the Mexican jails that may seem absurd to you Americanos. Our prisoners are allowed connubial visits. It is not within

our Latin nature to deny a man his basic needs. We will flail our prisoners, keep them for days in solitary confinement in rat-infested hellholes. Feed them frejoles full of cockroaches. . . . But love, we cannot deny them. Perhaps we are romantic. At least, we are more enlightened and humane than your penal authorities in this respect.

"What transpired when Ortego received his wife?"

The captain laughed immoderately. "He didn't receive her. He told us the night he was booked, with the telltale blood still on his clothing that he would not see his wife. . . . Of course when she presented herself here, all pretty smiles and seductive glances and pleaded to be taken to him, how could we resist? Unfortunately, we had to deny her the pleasure after all. One of my lieutenants — quite by accident — happened to place his hand on her bosom. What he felt was not soft and round and warm — it was cold and hard. It was a gun, Senor. The sweet little lady tried to bring her husband a weapon with which to shoot his way out of jail. . . . So that was one connubial visit that was never consummated."

The Captain turned to the letter and scowled as he laboriously pored through it. "These priests and their cursive handwriting," he muttered. "It's part of a Papish plot to keep the people in ignorance."

"Could I be of service?" Cabot inquired. "We've already robbed poor Ortega of his privacy. One more reader of his personal mail can do no further harm."

The Captain handed him the letter, torn out of its envelope, and growled, "Read it."

"My Son", Cabot read aloud:

Tonight is the night when the priest makes his confession and asks for absolution. My jailers, here, are not very pious, so since there is no one else, may I make my confession to you?

I am sorry for many things tonight. But one of the things that makes me saddest of all is a tale brought to me that you were beaten and hurt by your friends; that

you ran off alone into the hills, spent the night there, and when they found you in the morning, the tear stains were still fresh on your face.

Let us make a bargain, my son: I will forgive you if you will forgive me. I will forgive you for the small and really unimportant part you were forced to play in my capture – if you will forgive me and my adult society for shaping a world in which one small boy should be forced to bear such a burden of guilt.

I know you were forced to betray me, and I understand. But as you grow older, my son, you will learn that people sometimes do perverse and unaccountable things without *force, things which they themsleves do not always understand. When you can understand these unaccountable things and forgive them, you will discover that forgiveness is greater than vengeance; understanding is more satisfying to the soul than retribution.*

You are a good boy, Ramon. I knew it when you came to beg me to go to Valle de Brava to say last rites for your grandmother. If I had been able to fashion a better world, I might have been pastor of a fine church, where all could come to worhsip in freedom, tolerance and joy. We would have become great friends, you and I, Ramon. I would have given you your first communion, trained you as altar boy. Later, I would have posted your wedding banns, christened your children.

But tonight, as the hours zero in and the time left for repentance grows short, one must sift out all the little sins and concentrate only on the big ones – such as the one I and my society have committed against you and all children.

I wish, when I say to you, "Forgive me, Ramon, for I have sinned". . . I could hear you reply: "I forgive you, Father. And to prove it, I will build the world you didn't build. I will banish forever all hunger, vengeance and hatred . . . I will build cathedrals that will tower to the sky."

Your Supplicant,
Father Pro.

Cabot cleared his throat when he had finished reading the missive. "Well," he finally said, "do you think this letter will endanger the morals of your prisoner, my Captain?"

The officer blew his nose. "Leave it with me," he muttered. "I will send it in to you in Ortego's cell just as soon as we have satisfied ourselves that there is no hidden message."

Ramon Ortego was a rather small man whose eyes burned with unnatural intensity out of a handsome face, torn with bitterness.

Cabot introduced himself and explained his mission. "I came to deliver a letter to you from Father Pro," he said. "Unfortunately, there will be a delay while your jailers assure themselves that there is nothing subversive in the message. . . . After all, the letter has been delayed some twenty-three years, so a further small delay can be of no great consequence."

"Do you know what I did to Father Pro?" the man asked him abruptly.

"I've heard the story."

Ortego turned and sprawled down on his bunk.

Seating himself in the hard, straight-backed wooden chair Ortego had vacated, Cabot watched the man manipulate a badly deformed right thumb. The tip of the thumb seemed to be bent forward grotesquely against its joint.

"You have seldom seen a thumb like that, I will wager, Senor. No man is born with such a monstrous digit. This was done to me one night when I was eight years old, the night after I had placed the Judas kiss on Father Pro."

"I know the story," Cabot repeated. "You were a child, and you were forced—"

"You need not make excuses for me, Senor," the man interrupted. "I could have suffered a beating, torture. I could have suffered my tongue to be cut out. I could have been castrated. These are the things real men suffer, Senor, before they commit an act of treason. . . . But my own

peers accidentally hit upon a far more effective torture, those boys no older than myself who vented their fury on the betrayer of Mexico's holiest man. They intended only to punch me senseless . . . but in the fray my thumb was broken. With the torture in my brain, that long night in the hills, I didn't feel this little pain. The thumb was never set, and it healed itself in this grotesque fashion just to make sure that not a day of my life would go by that I would fail to be reminded of my perfidy."

"I think you are too harsh with yourself," Cabot said. "Would anyone expect a small boy to hold his own against a Colonel in El General's elite police cadre?"

"Father Pro would have escaped, if it had not been for me. And just in case my broken thumb failed to remind me each day, the people of Valle de Brava made sure I didn't forget.

"The older people were polite, but remote. They averted their glance to avoid looking at me. They said, with their lips, that of course I had no other alternative than to do what I did. . . . but with their eyes they loathed me.

"I had no childhood, from that day forward, Senor. Not a child in the village would play with me, speak to me or even look at me.

"There was no team play for me, Senor. No sports, no comradeship. When I grew older, I never knew that special kind of thrill when a girl smiles on a boy in a certain way for the first time. On my eighteenth birthday I visited a whore. I spread my money out on her dresser – but when she looked at me for the first time and recognized me – she spat in my face.

"As you can imagine, Senor Ames, there was very little for me to do but read – and study.

"I read a great many kinds of books. I read the writings of Kant, Schopenhauer, Karl Marx. I also read the works of Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin. Your anarchists, Sacco and Vanzetti, who were executed at about the same time as Father Pro, became heroes to me. I assumed personal guilt for their execution. My all-consuming need for redemption

took in all the oppressed of the entire world.

"When I was eighteen I entered the National University – on a scholarship, of course. My school record spoke for itself, and luckily for me, none of the hatred of my townsfolk could be reflected from the pages of the school record book, from the sheets of my examination papers, which were judged far away from Valle de Brava.

"I was known quickly as a radical. I had a certain facility with the pen, Senor, and soon groups of all sorts were using me to express their thoughts on paper. Communist, Socialist, Anarchist, Nihilist – I didn't care who made use of my talents, so long as they were directed against the injustice of the overloads against the underlings.

"At the University I made my first friend – a fellow radical named Jaime Gomero.

"Leon Trotsky came to Mexico the year I entered the University. A group of us would gather regularly at his house in the outskirts of Mexico City and hear about how it was in Russia in the days of the Czars. He told us about Lenin, and how, upon his death, there was great conflict between the Trotsky ideology and that of Stalin. Stalin won, by force, lies, deceit and mass murder, and he, Trotsky, was forced to flee. He found asylum, finally, in Mexico.

"I met many people those evenings when we gathered in Trotsky's patio. One of them was an artist named Diego Rivera. He became very influential in international art circles, and he played a droll little game of his own, because of his prestige and eminence he was hired by the Establishment to paint murals for great public buildings, palaces of the government and the ruling classes. But in these murals he would poke devastating fun at the Establishment itself! My friends and I would worship reverently at the altar of his murals. How well I remember one of them – 'Nightmare of War and Dream of Peace.'

"Trotsky became my idol. He was not only my political leader, but my father, my teacher, my friend. When he was assassinated, my world came to an end for the second time.

I was not yet 21 years old, but I had learned that there are some tragedies too great for the human heart to bear. I believe something snapped in me, then."

Ortego stared moodily into space and Cabot took advantage of his silence to raise a provocation question:

"But these two men who were your idols, they were diametrically opposite. How could you worship Father Pro, the priest, the representative of the Catholic faith and of Christ's vicar in Rome . . . and at the same time adore Trotsky, who believed in no God?"

"God is a nebulous entity, Senor. There is a very similar word in your English language; in our Spanish we have no such confusion. The God which most people worship – whether they be Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Mohammedans or Hindus – is the essence of *goodness*. God is Good. Trotsky fought oppression just as Father Pro fought oppression, and just as Christ fought oppression. Christ was killed by the Roman soldiers. Father Pro was killed by El General . . . Trotsky was killed by a young man – an agent of Stalin who wanted not to bring *good* to the people of the world, but to wield power over them."

Ortego fell into another silence. For some moments he manipulated the joint of his deformed finger. Then, at length he continued with his tale:

"The next ten years of my life were dedicated fanatically to the righting of wrongs. I neglected everything, everybody. My friends, even my wife. Jaime and I drifted apart. The revolutionary life was right for him when he was a wild-eyed young radical like myself. But time slowed him up. . . Time and dissolution of the spirit. Jaime wandered out of my life. He went to sea under a foreign flag. He lived for a while in Goa; took up with an Indian woman in the Portuguese colony there. From time to time he would return. He had taken to drinking heavily. There was little we had left to talk about.

"Esperanza was unhappy. She wanted a child. She would say to me, 'Ramon, I am getting older every day. Every day is slipping away forever, and soon I will be barren. Can we

see a doctor, see him together, and try to learn why I don't have babies?'

"But I didn't want a baby. A baby son of mine, when he grew to be eight years old, might become a Judas and a traitor. 'The sins of the fathers are visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generation.' . . . I told Esperanza it was God's will that we should be childless."

"I believe you are crazy," Cabot said.

The man shrugged. "Perhaps. Aren't we all just a little bit mad? For ten years I didn't stop working. I held a job as political reporter on a newspaper by day, and by night – far into the night, often until dawn– I would write inflamatory pamphlets and revolutionary tracts for the Party. As time went on, it seemed that a new quality was filtering into the material I was instructed to prepare. I was writing less and less on how to confront the overlords, how to debate political philosophy with them . . . and I was writing more and more such things as detailed instructions how to instigate riots, set forest fires, burn crops, bomb buildings."

"At what point did it occur to you that you were defeating your own self-appointed task in life?" Cabot asked him quietly.

Ortego smiled. "It occurred to me – when I was far past the point of no return. It is one of life's unbearable little ironies that a man must go to jail in order to find time to reflect on how he should have stayed out of jail."

"A jailed revolutionary," Cabot said, "just like a dead revolutionary, is of very little value to any cause."

"Ah, if we could only turn back. This is another of life's little cruelties, Senor. The best of man's knowledge comes to him when it is too late to utilize it."

Cabot, then, plunged directly in headlong and raised the question that had been nettling him since his interview with Ortego began:

"They tell me you are here because you killed a man in a barroom brawl. Hardly an appropriate climax to the career of a fiery revolutionary."

"Yes, of course . . . that is what they tell." The man lay back again on his bunk and stared at the ceiling above him.

"The prosecutor has prepared his case," Ortego went on. This man, an Americano, reached for my wallet. We were both drunk. There were words – and then I pulled a gun and shot him.

"There was much confusion, with crowds of people jostling about. I escaped without recovering my wallet.

"The Americano did not die at once; he did not die for several days, in fact. When they found my wallet in his pocket they thought that he, the Americano, was one Ramon Ortego. My wife was called in to formally identify me. When she was led into his hospital room she screamed: 'No, no, that is not my Ramon.'

"Unluckily for me, Senor, the Americano recovered consciousness before he died. He admitted stealing the wallet of the man who then shot him. The police went to my house, found my clothes covered with gringo blood. I was arrested within a matter of hours."

Cabot said abruptly, "*Ortego – you are lying in your teeth.*"

For the first time, the man smiled; it was a grim smile.

"Senor Ames, you are so perceptive. . . do you not also perceive that I am paying the penalty for killing Father Pro?"

"Why don't you tell me what really happened?"

"It's a very ugly story, Senor. The police version is much pleasanter. But as a matter of fact, I was nowhere near, when the Americano was killed. I was in your United States, in a jail – a much more comfortable jail than this. My fingerprints, and what they called my 'mug shot' were made while I was behind the bars, at precisely the time the Gringo was killed."

"But your wallet was found on the person of a dying pickpocket, and his blood was found on your clothes?"

"You have not read many detective stories, Senor Ames, or you would know that the unbelievable happens far more regularly than the logical. I had been sent to the States by

my Party to attend a summer camp in the mountains in your back-country region of Tennessee. It was a seminar to train revolutionary pamphleteers in new techniques. I entered your country illegally. Your border is so long, and so lonely, and so vulnerable. I was instructed to leave all identification behind me, but to come with empty pockets. An airplane was waiting to pick me up at a given point, supply me with false credentials and take me to San Antonio, where I was given funds and sent by bus to my destination. Unluckily, the seminar was raided before it got under way, and I was jailed. I have an alibi. A perfect, fool-proof alibi, Senor. It rests in the files of your FBI in Washington. I was being entertained royally in your jails when the gringo was killed.

"They finally released and deported me. When I arrived at my home, my Esperanza was waiting for me with a tearful confession. Jaime, the prodigal, the third member of our college triumvirate, had returned. He had wooed her in my absence, and out of her loneliness and her longing for a child, she said, she had welcomed him into my bed. But all too soon, she further confessed, her lover became her captor. He made her a virtual prisoner in her own home, appropriated my clothing, my identification, my meagre wine cellar. He had been drunk for days, she went on, behaved in a very strange way. . . but I had stopped listening. I was already planning how I would kill my wife. . . . My plan was never put into operation because, you see, the police came too soon and arrested me for murder."

"So you are assuming the blame and paying the penalty for a murder committed by the man who betrayed you and seduced your wife?"

"Of course. But do you not see how exquisitely the pieces fit? By paying the penalty for the murder I *didn't* commit, I will earn my redemption for the crime I *did* commit – the murder of Father Pro. And here is the final coup-de-grace, the final piece of beautiful irony. Since I am paying for Jaime's murder, I have a murder coming to me, do I not, Senor?. . .My friends will soon smuggle a gun

into my cell. This was a plan we made long ago; if any of us was arrested on a serious charge, the others would smuggle a gun to him so he could shoot his way out. The details were worked out so carefully that they were failure-proof. I do not want to shoot my way out. I want to pay the price for my crime against Father Pro. But when the gun is brought to me, Senor, I will take a little holiday from my cell. I will be gone just long enough to kill Esperanza. Then I will return."

Cabot drew a long, deep breath. "Ortego, I have a piece of news for you. This gun smuggling attempt, this failure-proof caper you describe, has already been made – and it has failed. The woman who brought the gun you planned to use to kill her with, was your own wife."

The man, lying on his prison bunk manipulating his deformed thumb, was suddenly transfixed, his arm suspended in mid-air.

At that moment a deputy of the prison captain appeared at the barred door and slipped through an envelope, now grimy and mutilated.

"This is now the property of the prisoner," the guard growled. "We have examined it, and found it harmless so the prisoner may keep it. And you, Senor, must leave now. Your visiting period is over."

He waited to conduct Cabot out.

Cabot arose and turned to the man on the bed. "Amigo," he said, "I think you are a very sick man. Read the letter . . . and meanwhile, I shall be working on some plans."

Cabot asked to be taken to the office of the prison captain. The guard demurred at first, but to Cabot's surprise, Augustin Lopez, was waiting for him as though by appointment.

"I see you satisfied yourself that the letter of a dead priest to an eight-year-old boy could not start a prison riot, Captain Lopez," Cabot said.

The man's grim face relaxed into a strange smile. "You will be surprised to hear this, Senor, but I took advantage

of the interval to have two copies of the letter made. We have very sophisticated photographic equipment here in my prison. We can make instant reproductions of anything subversive or suspect found on a prisoner's person."

"I see you were taking no chances," Cabot said drily.

"As a matter of fact, I had the copies made for each of my two small sons. My wife, she is very religious, and I knew it would please her to have these. Purely as souvenirs, you understand. The followers of Father Pro have nominated him for sainthood, as you may be aware. And replicas such as these, in the priest's own handwriting, might one day be of great sentimental if not monetary value."

"Lopez, I believe you are a sentimental old phony. I would like to speak with you for a moment or so, if I may?"

The Captain ushered him into his office and invited him to have a seat, passed him a cigar.

"Captain Lopez, are you aware that your prisoner, Ortego, is probably in advancing stages of paranoia?"

Lopez shrugged. "If one is to adopt the popular theory that all man who commit murder are mad, we would feel only compassion for them instead of outrage and would turn them all loose. What would happen to society then, Senor?"

Cabot carefully controlled a sudden burst of anger. "My Captain," he said, "you are making no differentiation between emotional stress and clinical mental illness. This man, Ortego, has probably been insane for a long time. Today he is crazy as a loon."

"What makes you think so, my friend?"

"Well, for starters, he didn't commit the murder he is charged with. He knows there is documented evidence that he was thousands of miles away at the time – yet he sits there, waiting judgment and doom. Your prisons are so enlightened and humane, you say, that they allow connubial visits, Sir. What a pity that they do not also allow visits and an examination by a qualified psychiatrist."

Lopez whistled softly to himself, "If Ortego is mad," he

said, "how can we believe these things he has told you?"

"You have only to check with the FBI in Washington. They will have a record of his fingerprints and his police photographs, center front and profile, taken at the very time he was supposed to have murdered your man in a skid-row bar here in Veracruz."

"Senor Ames, why do people like you have to come around and complicate justice? Here we have a murdered man – one of your countrymen, Senor, which makes it a doubly ticklish situation, what with your embassy keeping a very alert eye on proceedings. And here we have positive identification and a confession. For us, the situation is neatly and tidily concluded – until someone like you comes around raising questions. If what you say is true, we will have to conduct an investigation, do paper work. Even worse, we will have to renew our search for the real killer; otherwise, the American embassy will be most unhappy... We are short handed, Senor. Ortego needs a lawyer to handle these details in his behalf. Poor devil needs a lawyer as well as a psychiatrist."

Lopez fell again to whistling to himself.

"It just happens," Cabot said "that I can give you the name of the real killer and tell you where he may be found. I do not believe it would be difficult to get a confession from him that would clear Ortego and effect his release... What would happen to the poor guy then would probably become another tragedy."

Lopez carefully extinguished his cigar, taking deliberate care and precaution in the gesture.

"Senor Ames," he finally said, "I am a very corrupt man, as you know. I have exacted certain sums, from time to time, for the Police Welfare Fund. This is a little custom of ours which, I am sorry to say, has become traditional in my country, as in many countries.

"Over the years, these small sum have amassed themselves into a considerable sum. Although they were not used precisely for Police Welfare, I diverted them to another cause which I consider equally worthy... I educated

both of my younger brothers. I was the oldest, and I had to fight my way up from the city streets. But the other two had something I lacked. My strength was here": (Lopez pointed to his muscular forearm.) "Their strength was here": (He pointed to his head.)

"My brother Reuben went to law school and is now a first rate criminal lawyer. . . Ernesto, the younger, became a doctor – a psychiatrist. . . . Both of these brothers owe me a favor or so."

Cabot smiled broadly. "My Captain," he said, "I will leave Ramon Ortego's future in your capable hands. But I will keep in touch. . . In the meantime, Adios. . ."

VIII

JOSINA VARGAS-SALAZAR

There is a street in Cuernavaca distinguished for more than its semi-tropical landscaping, its florid pink and white mansions built in the rococo style of the Mediterranean.

Even today, politicians refer to it as the "Street of the Millionaire Socialists." The common people more pungently call it "The Street of the Forty Thieves."

One of the most baroque houses along this street is the permanent residence of Senorita Josina Vargas-Salazar; it is the palace where El General established her as his mistress a quarter of a century earlier, and where she still presides over a menage stranger than any fiction or fantasy.

Cabot learned a great deal about the house – and very little about its occupant – from a garrulous taxi driver.

"There are some who say the ghost of El General still strides through that big, candy-box house," he said. "He couldn't let go of power while he was still alive, so why

should he let go of it now? He pulled the strings that manipulated half a dozen puppet presidents, right from this house I am taking you to. It is a historic house, Senor. Even when he was officially out of power, he remained the *jefe maximo*, guiding the administration by telephone calls to the National Palace."

"Tell me about the Senorita," Cabot urged. "She is the one I am coming to interview – not the ghost of El General."

"You will soon find out for yourself, Amigo."

When Cabot presented himself at the entrance of the villa he was challenged by a muscular young man who identified himself as one of the Senorita's "bodyguards."

"I am sure she will see me," Cabot protested. "Tell her I am the son of the newsman, Joe Ames, and I bring her a letter addressed to El General by Father Miguel Pro on the night before his execution."

"Who is Father Pro?" the young giant inquired. His face would have been an expressionless mask if it were not for the huge wad of gum he was visibly chewing.

"Never mind. Just carry my message to the Senorita. I believe there should be no problem."

When Cabot was brought face to face with Senorita Vargas-Salzar his initial reaction was that one cannot generalize in the matter of whores.

Laurette Blanca, who had worked her way up from the streets, looked and acted like a woman of the nobility. Josina Vargas, who had been gently born and who had dabbled briefly in prostitution before she became mistress of the mightiest man in Mexico and beneficiary of all the advantages and luxuries he could place at her command, bore all the traditional earmarks of whoredom.

Her mouth was an ugly red gash that spread like a wound across the lower portion of her face, from jowl to fleshy jowl. Her hair was black and lusterless from repeated dyeing, he judged. Her black eyes were heavily made up; there was a somber, brooding quality about them which

might have indicated years of secret and bitter sorrows – or years of vacuity.

The first words she spoke to him were startling: "You are an adorable boy," she said, sizing him up slowly. I'll bet there is fire in your loins."

Cabot smiled. "You have a great flair for flattery, Senorita. . . . Could I interest you in the letter written by Father Pro to your great and good friend?"

She tossed the mane of black hair out of her eyes. "I am not interested in El General," she said. "I have not been interested in him for many years; in fact, I never was interested in him. He was a fat old man. There are other things of far greater interest. You look like you have muscles of steel. May I feel them?"

"Senorita – I have remained in the vicinity of Mexico City most of the summer when I could have been in Yucatan with my fiancee, for the sole purpose of delivering seven letters. This is my second trip to Cuernavaca. . . Six of my letters have now been delivered; yours is the last. If I may just leave it with you now, I may still have time to rejoin the girl I am going to marry."

The woman sighed. "What a pity. The youngest and handsomest and best allow themselves to be snared, spread-eagled and bit by bit, year by year, castrated by some puny little virgin. . . Please relax, Senor Ames. I adore young men; I take them into my maw and devour them, destroy them. But I will grant you a reprieve; I will restore you to your puny little virgin and let her do the destroying."

"I appreciate your consideration," Cabot said, still smiling. He handed her the letter.

To his surprise she did not read it; instead she thrust it into the bodice of her low cut gown.

"This mission of mine has turned me into a bit of a historian," Cabot resumed, "I was hoping you could tell me some things about El General and how he figured in Father Pro's last days."

"I would far rather talk about myself, Senor. The

subject of El General is a very painful one to me. He robbed me of my youth. He plucked me out of my carefree girlhood."

"Pardon me," Cabot said. "I got the story somewhat different: he plucked you out of a Mexico City whorehouse."

The woman laughed without mirth. "I loathe historians," she said. "They refuse to allow one to re-write history.... Yes, he plucked me out of a Mexico City whorehouse. He dressed me up in furs and diamonds, and I made him the envy of all other men in all of Mexico. And all the women envied me. I never stood at his side at public affairs; *she* was always at his side for the ceremonial things. His wife... But *I* was the one they envied when they visualized me at his side in private. This virile, vigorous hero, the Strong Man of all Mexico whose clenched fist was a nation-wide emblem of power and vitality... Little did they know about that obscene little rubber object that was his only means of making love to me."

"Senorita Vargas, you are very bitter. But no one forced you to remain."

"Ah, Senor, but you are naive. Surely you must know that nearly all captive people are enslaved by their own weaknesses. I traded my youth for power, fame, money –"

"And an 'obscene rubber object.' "

"You rub my wounds with salt, Senor. But remember – in addition to the ugly memories, I have untold millions at my disposal, funds which El General wisely put away in my behalf in a Swiss bank. I can support dozens and dozens of young boys for the rest of my life, and never so much as make a dent in the capital. Strange as it may seem to you, this legacy is not the one I treasure most."

She rose abruptly and walked to the wall, where she removed a small oil painting which concealed a wall safe. With a deft adjustment of the dial she opened it, removed a small box.

She laid out the contents of the box on a small coffee table beside Cabot.

"These, Senor Ames, are my real treasures. This pair of brooches belonged to Maria Cristina, the Spanish queen-mother regent... This fan, owned by the little Infanta Isabella when she was thirteen, appears in all her state portraits... These letters, here, are love letters written by one of the Bourbon kings to his mistress, who was El General's ancestor... This pen signed the Treaty of Munster... This signet ring sealed all the public documents of Amadeus, Duke of Aosta.

"All of these relics, Senor, have very little antique value – at least their monetary value to me is negligible compared with my bank holdings. But I treasure them because *she* wants them. They are the tangible remnants of El General's patrician ancestry. *She* wants them for her children, and her children's children."

"Why don't you let her have them?" Cabot asked.

Josina laughed. "*She* had what I always wanted. A name. Marriage. Respectability. Daughters to inherit... Now I have what *she* wants, and I won't give it up. Periodically I receive a new petition. Usually it was in the form of a discreet communication from her lawyers to mine. Finally she swallowed her pride and wrote me a personal entreaty. It was for her grandchildren, she begged. The treasures of El General's family should remain within that family, go down into history with it. Go down into the future. I only laughed at her pleas. *She* had his children; *I* had his children's heritage – and I would keep it... One of these days, who knows, I may decide to distribute these little knick-knacks among my lovers. Ernesto would put them under glass and pass them off as his own family heirlooms. Ruiz would run to the nearest pawn-shop.

"You are raising your eyebrows, Senor. Let me tell you about my young men:

"There is Ruiz; the one who met you at the door. He is not very bright, but he has strong biceps. If it were not for me he would be a broken-down prizefighter today, with cauliflower ears and a battered brain... Ernesto writes poetry – and takes photographs of naked girls that he sells

to dirty magazines in your country. . . Carlos was a student, studying architecture, till I introduced him to a new brand of architecture. . . Guilberto is the Adonis; very talented. I discovered him in Havana in a sex circus where he performed with three girls for money. . . Josef is a former theological student. . . Alphonz is an artist. He does not care for women, really; he prefers men. But when he is a good boy I reward him with a selection from my little harem. . .Felixio – ah, but he is an amusing one, Felixio is a dwarf! Not three feet tall! Sometimes I dress him up in knickers and call him my son. . . Josef is a teacher of romance languages. . . Rudi is a pick-pocket.

"What a darling lot they are. How good-natured; how compliant! I do not require much of them – after all, there is strength in their numbers. There are only so many nights in the week. In return for their favors, I do favors for them. Not only do I support them, but I give them spending money, clothes. I am very generous."

"I can see a pattern," Cabot commented. "Because you hated one man – El General – so much, you avenge yourself on *all* men.

"If it is 'revenge', it is indeed 'sweet revenge.' Senor Ames, I never had a lover when young girls are supposed to have them. I never knew a young, beautiful body when my own body was young and beautiful. I am simply restoring to myself the youth I was robbed of."

She disposed of the subject with finality.

Then Cabot said, "Aren't you curious to find out what Father Pro had to say to your General?"

"Ah yes, the letter. . . No man entertains very tender thoughts toward his executioner. Perhaps this Father Pro will teach me some brand new invective to heap upon my 'great and good friend.' "

She took the missive from her bosom and read it aloud:

Your Excellency:

It would be easy, tonight, to cast myself in the role of the Roman gladiator who, facing Caesar from the ring,

dipped his sword and said, "We who are about to die salute you."

But I have learned through my studies and through my experience (albeit limited – and now about to be amputated) to take a larger view of history.

It has been revealed to me that there are no losers, nor are there any winners, but a constantly changing cast of characters whose fortunes rise and fall with the passing centuries. The Caesars of today will be the Gladiators tomorrow, and civilization's last, best hope is that with each change, each fluctuation of destiny we will learn a little more, understand a little more, and the new generations coming up – the shining youth of future days – will learn to channel these fluctuations so that one day the flow of civilization may exceed its ebb.

Although I have been personally anguished by the futility of your methods, I can bear no animosity toward you personally. For I know we are puppets, you and I, playing out a part that was foreordained for us.

Your method was to destroy the churches in order to build the roads. But the road is, after all, only the instrument of those who travel upon it. The road is not a destination in itself, nor does it take the traveler to his destination; this he must achieve himself.

And just as the road is only an instrument for the traveler, so is the body just a vehicle for the soul.

Tomorrow my body will be dust, Excellency – my soul will live on in whatever I have built in the lives of the men and woman who have crossed my way,

Your method was to build excellent modern skyscrapers to house your reformed government agencies. My method was to build more stately mansions. But for every church you have burnt down. . . I will have erected a hundred temples of the spirit.

You have rendered unto Caesar that which is Caesar's – and I have rendered unto God that which is God's.

Miguel Pro, S.J.

There was a silence after she had finished the reading. Then suddenly, without any warning, the woman shattered the air with wild, unrestrained laughter.

"Did you hear that, my General?" she screamed. "I know you are skulking around here still. I hear your heavy boots on the stairs, and I've even seen your apparition. I know you are watching when I take my young men to bed – your bed. The room bristles with your fury because you can't do anything about it. You couldn't when you were living. . . and you can't when you are dead. The people have forgotten you – you Iron Moth! And now Father Pro, the little Jesuit you hated most of all, has driven the final nail on your oblivion."

Cabot found himself shuddering in the silence that followed this outburst. He half expected the ghost of El General to emerge from the shadows thrown by the flickering candlelight and strangle this woman whose hatred followed him past the grave.

"Could I ask you for a drink of some sort?" he said.

Josina opened a liquor cabinet and poured them each a brandy.

She laughed bitterly. "Can you feel the air crackling with my late lover's rage and frustration? The blood he doesn't have is straining at the veins and arteries which decayed five years ago. If his rage could make this villa tumble down around us, he would do it. But he can't. He's dead, dead, dead! Dead and forgotten."

Suddenly the anger seemed to drain out of her; once she had spent it, her good humor returned. "Mussolini was another strong man," she said. "What is there, *good*, that people remember about him today?. . . He made the trains run on time! Ethiopia is still going strong. Haile Salassie will be the Lion of Judah for years to come. But the great Conqueror was not really a Conqueror at all . . . He simply had a knack with time tables."

Cabot laughed. "You're quite a woman, Senorita Josina. I wish you had the time and the desire to fill up some of the blank pages in the story of Father Pro."

"I have plenty of time, Senor. I have nothing but time. You see, the truth is that I am really an old woman. These young men of mine – truly, they do not erase away any years. What do you want to know?"

She poured another brandy for each of them.

"I have talked to six people about Father Pro," Cabot said slowly. They molded his life, just as he molded theirs. It's like fitting together a fascinating puzzle, a jigsaw puzzle of the past. You now hold the only pieces that are missing. I'm curious to know the true interreaction between the mighty Strong Man of Mexico and the humble little Jesuit priest."

Josina leaned back in her chair and crossed her plump legs.

"Few people knew El General as I did," she began:

El General told me in one of his rare moments of warmth and honesty that he had originally been inspired by only the loftiest of ideals. He had been a school teacher, and he had an analytical mind which told him, when he was very young, all the things that were wrong with Mexico.

He helped in some of the early revolts. Mexican politics, in those days, was a sort of free-for-all. The procedure was to help a rival strong man to power, accept appointments and all the prestige that went with them as a reward, then use this power to overthrow the benefactor.

My General even utilized the prestige of the outlaw Pancho Villa. When Villa was assassinated there were those who said that certain people he had helped, now came to fear him for good reason, and consequently had to destroy him.

El General rose to power not long before the rise of your President Roosevelt, a man he later came to admire very much. He was smart enough to know that in order to control the masses he had to appear to serve the masses.

To demonstrate this devotion to the people he resolved to build roads; to advance public education, organized labor, agrarian reform – even the plumbing. He built

skyscrapers in Mexico City, got better wages for the workers and divided up the huge feudal estates into small farms.

He worked out a Six Year Plan which depended, for its financing, on the expropriation of the oil lands which were in the hands of your huge American companies.

The people loved him for this. He became a great popular idol, Senor Ames. Physically, he had the appearance of great strength. He had a hard, bronzed face that matched his public image of power. He made a great show of fraternizing with the Mestizos – although I think he secretly hated them.

The first thing he did when he came to power was move out of Chapultepec Palace and turn it into a museum – "for the people." What the people failed to notice was that El General had a great taste for luxury. The Palace was a draughty barn; the masses didn't know it, but they paid for finer quarters for my General.

He had a gift for the Grand Gesture. He encouraged people to send in messages free over the national telegraph every day between twelve and one to tell him of their needs. He listened to the things they told him. He went out to the people, traveled into the hinterland to seek them out and palaver them. His ringing battlecry was *"Mexico for the Mexicans."*

But he found out very early in his career that the crown of the despot – even the benevolent despot – is a heavy one. He was basically a simple man, for all his bluster, and your presidents Coolidge and Harding, backed by all their diplomatic experts, were too much for him.

There would be state visits, with much fanfare and protocol. *She* would be beside him; *she* would be photographed with Senora Coolidge and Senora Harding and all the top ladies of your land. But later, when he came to my chamber to find release and renewal, I would tell him the truth. "They are laughing at you," I would say. "They flatter you with their smiles and their salutes, but they secretly think you're an uncouth Bolshevik. You'll never

get Mexico's oil lands from them; they're too smart for you."

I think El General's dissolution began when he discovered he couldn't outwit the Yanqui oil barons. It is a tragic thing, is it not, Senor, that grandeur leaves the human spirit so soon? All too soon, the militant reformer became corrupt.

Although he claimed to be a socialist, he as well as all of his friends became capitalists. His secretary of war, —a special crony— after a night of gambling had his losses paid out of the national treasury. And in spite of his lofty program of land reform, after half a dozen years in power, he knew that millions of acres remained in the hands of a few wealthy *hacendados*.

And like all despots, he held his rule by fear. The shooting of military officers grew more and more frequent. In the beginning there was a government police which the cynics called "*ley fuga*" – law by banishment, or flight. Soon *"a ley de suicidio"* became more common. Announcements were regretfully made in the public press that *this* military man, or *that* government official, had "killed himself."

For the benefit of the public El General had to have a whipping boy on whom to lay the blame for his failures. What was more logical than the Church? Tell the people the priests have robbed them of all their money and lands. Tell them the gold is all in the churches, and the food is taken from their mouths to feed the fat Archbishops and Cardinals. Seize the property of the Church to finance the reforms that couldn't be financed by oil-well diplomacy!

The General proceeded cautiously at first. He passed restrictive laws. All parochial schools were closed, and the property of the convents, schools and churches was seized.

But in the provinces, in the outlying states there were local leaders who found in El General's policies a license for sadistic cruelty. In the state of Tobasco a local dictator named Garrido Canabal organized his own band of "Red Shirts" whose mission it was to harass and destroy the

Church. He had his own little jests. He passed laws that no priest could enter the state unless he was legally married! He named one of his own children "Lucifer" and another "Lenin." When he tired of humiliating the clergy, then he started killing them.

But during all this time, Senor Ames, God was not dead; He was only in hiding. Men like your Father Pro kept him alive. The sacraments were celebrated in garages, in cellars. The Host was elevated from bureau drawers, radio cabinets, stoves.

El General's hatred of Father Pro verged upon paranoia. In him he saw the source, the core of all his frustrations. The common people laughed at the mighty General, while they fell to their knees before this humble little priest.

He hated Father Pro for many reasons. He hated him for his wisdom and his intellect. A Jesuit is not just an ordinary priest. Do you know what it is to be a Jesuit priest, Senor Ames? Two years of seclusion and prayer when one is barely more than a child. Two years, next, as a scholastic, studying classical subjects; three years in the higher sciences and philosophies, five years of teaching in Jesuit schools, four more years of theology and a final year of retirement and prayer. Then and only then is he ready to take his vows and be ordained... El General had the strong arm – but little Father Pro had the mighty brain... The wonderful pride of this man when he signed his deathbed letter to El General with the initials of his order. Society of Jesus! What a pity the letter could not have been delivered to El General. This would have been the final mockery to the Man of Iron – the Iron Moth!

Josina toyed thoughtfully with the letter that lay still in her hand. She opened it at length and read it through again silently.

"What a pity this could not have been delivered," she repeated softly to herself.

"Senorita," Cabot said, "I have delivered six of these letters and have been privileged to learn the contents. I do

not think that time has robbed them of their relevance. Like old wine, they seem to age well."

"But El General is dead. . . He died a tired old man, after a long exile. There was no procession of thirty-thousand to mourn him. Not even three thousand, not even three hundred. . . Not even three!"

The woman rose and started pacing the floor, pausing directly in front of Cabot now and then to drive home a forceful point:

I think El General started to die the day he killed Father Pro. How well I remember his anguish as he relayed to me their final confrontation.

The game was up for the little priest, and my General had him brought to his office for a final confrontation. What should have been the mighty man's greatest triumph turned out to be his most shattering defeat. He broke down in tears when he told me about it later.

He had been oh, very partonizing in the beginning. He had offered Father Pro a cigar, a glass of wine. Then, when the priest politely declined his magnanimous gesture, he said, "My friend, why have you done this to me? Why do you make a monster of me? Why didn't you leave Mexico like so many others, instead of staying, and forcing me to have you shot?"

"My work was here, here in my own country, with my own people."

"You are trying to rationalize your crimes –"

"No, General; *you* are trying to rationalize *your* crimes. Do you really believe you can wipe away centuries of religious belief, over night?"

"And why not? For too many years the Church had a stranglehold on our people. Fears – superstitions – every weapon they could lay their hands upon. With these weapons they held the people in bondage – a bondage worse than slavery."

"And what you promise them is freedom?"

"I promise them freedom of thought. They will no





longer need a priest to do their thinking for them."

"No? So you can think for them instead... A great pity."

"Don't waste your pity on me, Priest! Your kind is finished! The future belongs to the young. Can't you see that? You have nothing to offer them."

The General was getting very angry; he always raised his voice to an unbecoming falsetto when rage took the place of reason.

Father Pro only smiled – a gentle, wise sort of smile.

"No, General," he said. "The only thing I see is that perhaps I was not the one to offer it to them."

El General called the guards, ordered them to take him away. His parting words were words of grudging admiration:

"Miguel Pro! What a pity you went into the priesthood. You would have made a great general."

With his final exit line, Miguel Pro topped him:

"With all due respect, General," he said, "Maybe you would have made a fine Pope."

Senor Ames, in direct defiance of El General, I marched with the procession of mourners that dreadful grey dawn. From all over Mexico they came. Some of them had waited all through the night, hoping, praying there might be a last minute intercession. The wealthy were there in their carriages; the poor stood with their shawls wrapped around their shoulders, shuddering against the damp.

The minute we heard the shots, a tremendous wail arose from the crowd – a wail that reached all the way to El General's palace, to his quarters where he was devouring quantities of wine to try vainly to erase the sights and sounds of his defeat.

One by one the candles were lit – thirty thousand of them. And when the coroner's wagon drove out of the prison gates the people fell in line behind it. The wealthy got out of their carriages and fine motor cars and joined the

procession on foot; rich and poor alike mingled in their common grief. I tell you, Senor, Mexico have never seen anything like it, before or since. The sound of their dirge must have traveled all the way to Heaven.

Josina returned to her chair and once again she scanned through the letter to El General.

"He was a smart one, that priest," she murmured. " 'For every church you have burnt down," he writes here, "I will have erected a hundred temples of the spirit.' I wonder what El General would say now if I should take some of the money – his money that he hid safely away in Switzerland – and build a church with it! That way he would be indirectly replacing at least one of the churches he destroyed, wouldn't he, Senor? How the old man would rage and fume!"

Suddenly she threw herself with unbridled enthusiasm into the whim. "I will put all my young men to work," she exclaimed gleefully. For a change of pace they will *earn* the money they get from me... It all falls so nicely in place, Senor. Carlos, my architecture student, will draw up the plans. Ruiz, with his muscles, will help dig for the foundations. Alphonz, the artist, will paint murals for the altar. Ernesto will pause from making up his dirty postcards to photograph my church in every stage of its progress. The photographs will be released to the newspapers, and the story that goes with them – which Guilberto will write – will say 'This is the church El General built posthumously to replace one of the many he burnt to the ground . . .' Rudi, the ex-pickpocket, will take charge of the poor-box... And Felixio, what will my poor little dwarf do? He will make jokes and keep everyone in smiles. Is this not an excellent revenge on my fine General, Senor Ames?"

"An excellent revenge," Cabot agreed.

"Ah, this will keep me busy for many months to come... Now you say, my friend, that time has not robbed Miguel Pro's letters of their relevance. So I think you are right. And do you know what I am going to do to prove it? I am going to return all of the heirlooms to *her* and her

filthy progeny, to be hoarded by them to the end of time. Maria Cristina's matched brooches; the Infanta Isabella's fan; the love letters, the pen, the signet ring. And just to be doubly generous, I'm going to add something of my own to the collection. I'm going to include this historic letter which Miguel Pro wrote to his executioner on the eve of his execution.

"I will – how did Father Pro so aptly put it – I will 'render unto Senora Caesar that which is Senora Caesar's.' "

"Bravo," said Cabot. "But in the meantime... don't forget to build the church!"

IX

CHICHÉN-ITZÁ

When Cabot arrived back at his hotel in Mexico City after the journey to Cuernavaca, he found Ellen Scott asleep in his bed.

The door, which he had burst open in impatient, heedless speed, was closed softly, gently as he recovered his astonishment and riveted his eyes on his unbidden guest.

She stirred slightly but was not fully aroused; quickly she drifted back into deep slumber.

Cabot eased himself quietly into the chair beside the bed and watched the sleeping girl. Her mouth was slightly open, and her soft breath teased a tendrill of tawny hair that lay over her cheek. Her lips, innocent of all lipstick, were soft and red. There was a translucence about her skin, a quality that seemed to shine from within.

"Ellen Scott," Cabot said to himself, "You are some dish!"

He watched her for a long time until it seemed that the sheer power of his unblinking stare roused her from her sleep. She opened her eyes.

"Hello" she said.

"Hello?" There was a question mark in his inflection.

Ellen sat bolt upright in bed and reached for Cabot's robe. "I thought you'd never get here. I've been waiting for hours and hours."

"You might have waited for days and days," he replied. "I just got back from Cuernavaca. I've finished my mission, and only a rare spurt of intuition prevented me from boarding a plane straight to Yucatan."

They both burst out laughing and fell into each other's arms.

Then Cabot said "What about the expedition? What about your summer credits?"

"What about *your* summer credits? I don't want any credits that you don't have. . . This is one of the important things I learned in Yucatan – without you."

He embraced her again – covered her with kisses.

A half hour passed before he spoke again. Then he said, "I am going to take you back to Chichen-Itza on the first plane."

"The *very* first plane? Can't we even eat?"

He laughed. "If this were your suite at the Reforma instead of my flea-bag hostelry, we could phone down for supper."

She put her finger to his lips. "Haven't you learned to stop punishing me because my father is rich?"

Later, sharing tamales in a Paseo all night restaurant, he said, "Tell me; what else did you learn in Yucatan?"

"Lots of things," she answered, between mouthfuls of tortilla. "Wherever people have lived for thousands of years, they leave their trash behind them. Buildings, sculpture, flints, not to mention their own skeletons. Layers upon layers of their trash. They also leave behind their evil. Diaz found more than 136,000 skulls of Huitzilopochtli's

victims, piled up to the rafters of his temple. And dozens of skeletons of young maidens have been dredged from the Cenote of the Rain Gods. The United Fruit Company and the Carnegie Insititue were there ahead of us – and single explorers were ahead of them back in the last century. They threw in logs about the size and weight of a maiden, as far as they could have been tossed by the priests. Then they measured the rope when it was drawn up, and that's how they knew where to dredge and how deep to dredge. Hundreds of maidens thrown into the slimy waters to bring rain!"

"We've come a long way since then," Cabot said, smiling.

"You're teasing me. What do you want to know about the expedition? We dig. We dig in the jungle by day, and we dig in the books at night. We have to know all about the country, the soil, the languages, past and present, the people, even the politics. We piece all this together and we have what is called the 'Horizon' of the digs. Everything we find has to be sketched or photographed and treated with chemicals to preserve it. Airplanes fly over us to sight mounds that we might not see from ground level. We have to know geology, paleontology, paleography, philology and history. We have to know how to catalogue, how to make radiocarbon tests to determine the age of the artifact. Cabot, you know these things better than I. Why are you asking?"

"No reason; just to hear you talk. And just wondering if you learned anything about human nature while you were digging in the jungle."

"I learned that you can't trust a chiclero. These are the native boys who go into the jungle to collect the sap from the sapodilla to make chewing gum for we luxury-loving Yanquis. They promise to lead us to new mounds and steles – but once they get our money, they buy a jug of *aguardiente* and neither we nor the Wrigleys ever see them again."

"Want to know what I learned while you were gone?"

Cabot asked.

"Maybe you learned that the Mexico City senoritas aren't as sexy as I am."

"I already knew that, Cleopatra! . . . But I also learned some things from Father Pro. I learned what is important and what isn't important, and how to keep them apart. I discovered that I don't want an unfulfilled wife. I'm going to take you back to Chichen-Itza; we're going to finish out the summer there together and get our credits. We're both going to be graduate archeologists, but I'm going to be the smarter one, because I have to earn the living in that job your father is going to get for me, because we can't eat hash out of potsherds or drink wine from crumbling faience cups.

"I've learned to put aside my idiot-type pride – which wasn't really pride at all but stubborn impracticality. I love you so much that I want you to be the wife of a brilliant and successful professor, just like you said. . . and if that doesn't make much sense, then whatever does, when a guy is nutty in love? The only thing I'm going to be arbitrary about is that we're going to be married right away."

"In the jungle?" she asked.

"Yep. In the jungle. I can't wait for engraved invitations, an orchestra and big tents on a Long Island lawn, and a four-foot cake to make everybody fat."

In Yucatan, the natives were complaining about the drought. No rain had fallen in weeks, unusual for this equatorial region; there was a strange dustiness about the jungle.

Ellen led Cabot to the choice sites of Chichén-Itzá largest, most beautiful, mightiest and most splendid of all the Maya cities, whose people – for a reason which would forever remain their secret – had one day abruptly abandoned.

She showed him the great Caracol solar observatory, deserted overnight by its stargazers, mathematicians and calendar-makers.

She showed him the Temple of the Warriors and the

Temple of Kukulkan, the Plumed Serpent, with its monstrous snake-heads, gargoyle gods and screaming jaguars.

They visited the amazing ball courts where the Mayas played their ceremonial game of Tlachtli, so closely akin to the basketball of the twentieth-century.

Everywhere, the forsaken city crumbled. The jungle, now parched, had crept into the streets, its hungry plants greedily devouring foundations, door sills. Monuments were displaced from their pedestals by enormous roots. Forest seeds had sprouted in the masonry cracks and the heaving action of shoots and suckers had forced apart the risers of the stairs to the pyramid temples, deserted stairwells, untrod throughout centuries of slumber.

There was a sudden clap of jungle thunder when Ellen led Cabot to the limestone ledge overhanging the cenote of the rain god.

"This is where the maidens were sacrificed," Ellen explained. "How do you like it as a spot for our wedding?"

"Nope. I don't believe in sacrificed maidens. I like the ball court better; I can somehow relate to basketball... Besides, the rain god is propitiated. We're going to be drenched."

They laughed together as they sought refuge from the sudden jungle storm.

The drought was over. The long, dusty summer had ended.

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